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ISSUE **222** JAN/FEB 2025 US \$14.95 CAN \$15.95



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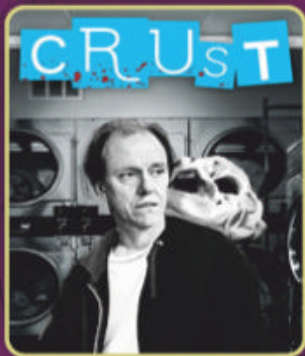
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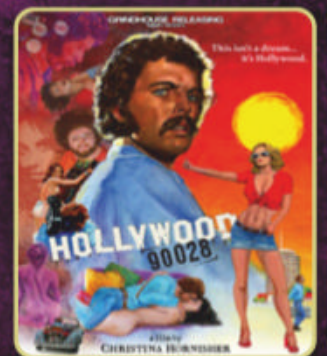
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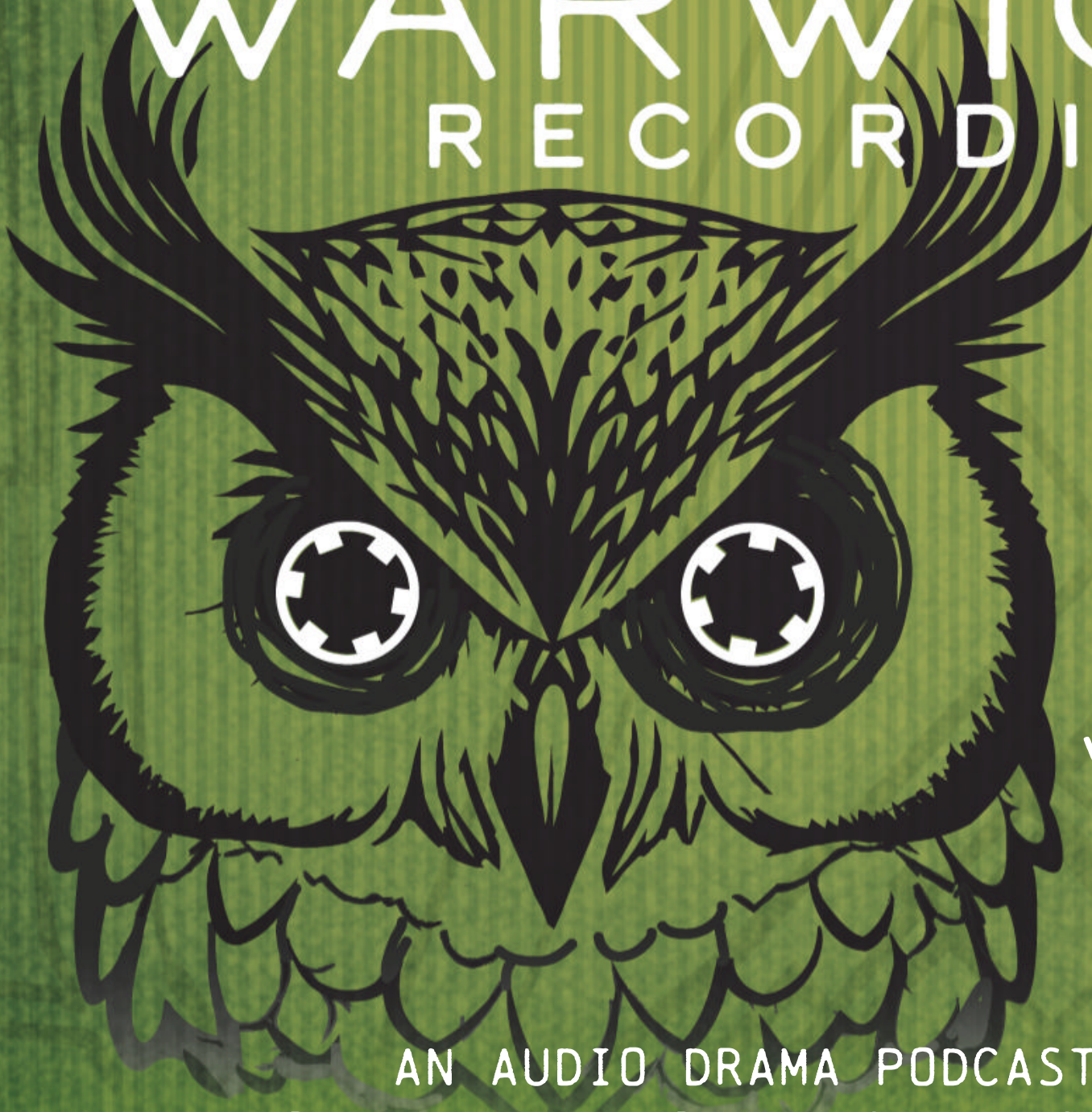
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12 BOOK OF BLOOD

Icon and iconoclast, Clive Barker has been marching to the beat of his own dark drum since breaking out as a genre superstar some four decades ago. Today he continues to defy rules to create new terrors and new visions that flout convention.

PLUS! A new gallery of Barker's beasts and new poetry from Clive! by **ANDREA SUBISSATI AND MAJO PAVLOVIC**

20



Wolfcop director Lowell Dean cuts an evil slice of fun with *Dark Match*, his violent and gory new film set in the world of '80s Canadian pro wrestling.

PLUS! Lucha Libre Horror Cinema, and a handy guide to essential lucha viewing, past and present! by **SEAN PLUMMER AND MICHAEL PASZT**

26 DARK DELICACIES GOES DARK

After three decades, one of the world's oldest and most beloved horror bookstores is closing its doors.

PLUS! Dark Del Howison might be closing shop, but his fiction continues to thrive late into the night. by **MONICA S. KUEBLER**

30 R.I.P. 2024: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Join us as we raise a glass to another year of horror and congratulate the standouts! by **STAFF**

DEPARTMENTS

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND 6
Barker's Bitch.

POST-MORTEM 7
Letters from fans, readers, and weirdos.

THE CORONER'S REPORT 8
Weird Stats & Morbid Facts, Expiring Minds, Shadowland, and more!

NEEDFUL THINGS 10
Strange trinkets from our bazaar of the bizarre.

CINEMACABRE 32
The newest films reviewed, featuring Steven Soderbergh's *Presence*.

REISSUED & REANIMATED 40
REVIVED: Hammer's new *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* boxed set.

BOWEN'S BASEMENT 42
DUG UP: *Salem's Lot* (2024).

BLACK MUSEUM 44
EXHIBIT: *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946).

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS 46
INKED IN: John Dolmayan and Ryan Benjamin's *Dead Samurai*.

THE NINTH CIRCLE 48
SPOTLIGHT: *Witchcraft for Wayward Girls* by Grady Hendrix.

THE FRIGHT GALLERY 52
ON DISPLAY: The Spine-Chilling Sketches of Cody Schibi.

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS 54
CURIO: Justice for Franklin Hardesty.

AUDIO DROME 57
NOW PLAYING: Blitz//Berlin.

PLAY DEAD 60
FEATURING: *Menace from the Deep* and *Amanda the Adventurer 2*.

VS 62
DEBATE: Who is Clive Barker's most indelible character?

NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

There was a time when I wondered if I missed out on *Rue Morgue*'s glory years – the days where her staff clocked in at an old funeral home, worked on the mag as a team, got invited to all the red carpets and premieres before the internet took everything online. I used to hear incredible stories from when we put on the Festival of Fear, the horror chapter of Toronto's massive FanExpo. *Rue Morgue* would book such horror A-listers as John Carpenter, Tobe Hooper, Joe Dante, Elvira, etc. and the staff would get to hang out with them over the weekend.

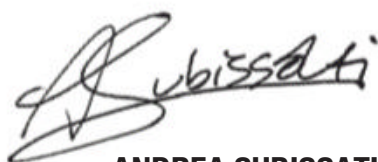
In the summer of 2005, Clive Barker was the FoF guest of honour and to this day, I never get tired of hearing Rodrigo's stories about him: how he hopped a plane with little more than the paint-spattered clothes on his back, how his first desired stop in Toronto was an art store that had to shut down so he could shop in peace, and how he spent his booth time that weekend painting away while chatting with fans. Later, he would gift us a massive 60 x 72-inch painting called "Death's Head," which had graced the cover of our 2004 Halloween double issue and has hung in our office ever since.

By the time I became editor eight years ago, the magazine had gone down to a bimonthly publication schedule and most of the staff worked part-time and from home. As such, that sense of office culture was whittled down to the witty repartee between me and my small dog, and the massive collection of movies, press kits, and memorabilia acquired throughout the years. That Barker painting, though, is always the *pièce de résistance* of the office tours I give to visiting fans. I'm keenly aware that if the building were to go up in flames, I'd likely perish trying to get that five-foot beast out the door, and I'm more or less okay with that.

Because I am a fan, of course, but that seems like such an inadequate word for my feelings about the man and his body of work. Beyond the quality and immense impact of his horror output – singular, challenging, simultaneously cerebral and carnal in equal measure – he stands alone in my mind as an artist. I've interviewed many, many filmmakers throughout my career, and I've acquired something of a shorthand to sort the kind of creative I'm dealing with: the intellectuals with something to say, the impressionists with their heads in the clouds, the gore-bros who just wanna get goopy, etc. There's no right or wrong way to be a filmmaker – indeed, *Rue Morgue* celebrates the genre in every form there is – but again, Clive always stood alone among his peers.

It's something I'm only now able to put my finger on, having visited him in his home last fall. I now understand that Clive is the sort of artist who might forget to sleep until he woke up at his easel with a crusty paintbrush still in hand, or to eat until he was distracted by an audibly grumbling stomach. I get the sense that he writes and paints the way a bird flies or a fish swims; simply because he must. I get the sense that even if he weren't *Clive fucking Barker*, the dark art icon living it up in Beverly Hills, he'd still be compulsively creating art wherever he wound up because there's just no alternative.

So, all this to say, I'm more than a fan: I'm an acolyte, a disciple, a total fucking simp. And whatever the future holds for my career in this world of freaks and geeks, I'll remain forever grateful not to only have met this particular horror hero of mine, but that I had the opportunity to remind our readers that while the human experience can be crude, violent, and downright ugly, we're sharing that experience with a true artist, the likes of which comes once in a generation – if we're even lucky enough to have found them and given them a platform to do their thing. I'm proud that *Rue Morgue* has been one such platform, even before I was at her helm, and prouder still to adorn her pages with the master's art once more.



ANDREA SUBISSATI
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Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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RUE MORGUE #222 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Roman Barker, Malingo, Claire Farley, Tom Pajdlhauser, Jonna Jackson, Danielle Keir, Phil and Sarah Stokes, and Al McMullan.

Cover: "Death's Womb"
Art by Clive Barker
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

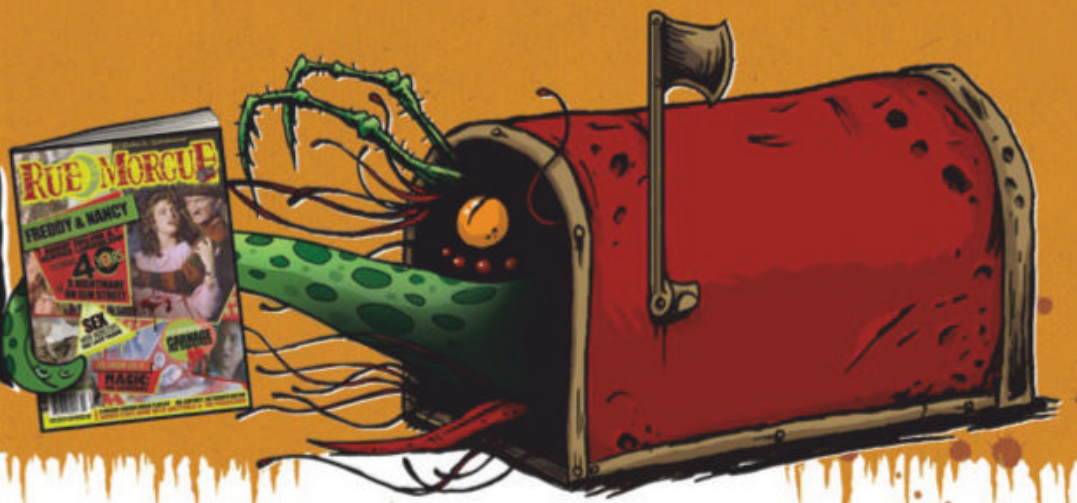
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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM



IN ANSWER TO WILLIE HOLMES IN RM#221, I saw the same early episode of *Entertainment Tonight* with a clip showing an actress being attacked by a giant rat. The actress was Lisa Blount and the movie was the 1984 post-apocalyptic film noir comedy *Radioactive Dreams*. The director was the late great low-budget auteur Albert Pyun, a filmmaker who, to quote the old nursery rhyme, when he was good he was very, very good (*The Sword and the Sorcerer*) and when he was bad he was horrid (*Dollman*). Still, in his defense he was never afraid to try and go off in new directions, even if it was completely around the bend. I must admit that I have never seen *Radioactive Dreams*, but from what I have heard the giant rat scene did not make the final cut (more's the pity rat... er, I mean that!).

JEFF TAYLOR – VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA

I AM FRENCH AND I DISCOVERED your magazine when I immigrated to the U.S. almost two years ago. I loved your “Note from Underground” in [RM#220] when you said that what attracts you in horror is “the ability to see the ugly in everything.” I felt that it was so true and very well said. I also liked your interview with Mr. Robert Eggers, especially when he said that he wanted to make the vampires scary again, that this particular monster should be something we are afraid of and not something attractive like in recent movies and TV shows. When I arrived in America, I was stunned to see all the horror magazines and books at Barnes and Noble. You would never find half of it in Europe, where unfortunately it is considered a minor genre, not serious, and a little bit disdained. But horror lives there not only in folklore, traditions, and tales, but also in reality, until now. It is just hidden because people are really scared of it, it is taboo and there is no “combination of honesty and catharsis” to quote you. America changed the private European horror into something public (for the best).

HADRIEN TURPO – ADDRESS WITHHELD

JUST WANT TO SAY I've been loving the magazine since I picked up my first issue back in 2003. I enjoy how it covers the full spectrum of horror but, in particular, books and film. I was thinking it would be great to feature an issue on disability representation in horror as there is so much to explore. Unfortunately, much of our beloved

genre still has many stereotypes about disability where people with disabilities are not cast in roles or are depicted as monsters or others to be feared. Very rarely do you find a film where the protagonist is a person with a disability who is not simply a victim, but a person who takes action against the evil force/antagonist. I can think of only one recent entry: the 2020 thriller/horror movie *Run*, which featured a person who uses a wheelchair in real life as the hero. Just food for thought. I do love how your magazine delves deeper into issues of diversity and puts the spotlight on those issues. Keep up the excellent work!

BRIAN PEDERSEN, VIA RUE-MORGUE.COM



I'M INDULGING IN an unofficial *Nosferatu* November, starting with this gorgeous issue of *Rue Morgue*! The interviews with Eggers and Daffoe are delicious teasers of what's to come on Christmas Day. I'm insanely jealous that only a

handful of AMC theatres will have Orlok's coffin on display, but alas... Also, two cover stories about books and book clubs? Love to see it. More please.

@HAUNTEDBYDEADLINES, VIA INSTAGRAM

I JUST WANT TO TAKE A MOMENT and thank you as well as everyone else who works so damn hard to put out such a fantastic magazine. The amount of passion comes through in every page.

UNHOLY MOSES, VIA EMAIL

RE: PSYCHO COP ON RUE MORGUE TV – I saw this when it came out on TV at, like, age ten, and Julie Strain is burned into my brain. It was on cable, so it was the better, more gorier version than the R-rated release. Also, *Return of the Living Dead 3* was another similar one I saw – with the punk zombie chick – both finally have their Blu-ray releases with unrated versions. We need the gory cut of *Nothing but Trouble* starring John Candy, Demi Moore, and Chevy Chase. Let's get this movement going!

@ARTDRUG4482, VIA YOUTUBE



RUE MORGUE WITH Fogfest's Grind Mind.

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POST MORTEM

C/O RUE MORGUE MAGAZINE

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LETTERS MAY BE EDITED FOR LENGTH AND/OR CONTENT.



CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE #
222

The actor playing Leatherface in the famous trailer for *Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* is Kane Hodder, best known for playing Jason in the *Friday the 13th* movies, while R.A. Mihailoff plays the role in the actual film.

Crematoria ovens typically heat to 1400 - 1800°F (760 - 982°C) and will completely incinerate a full-grown adult in two to four hours.

Many of the laboratory sets in Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* movie were reused from the original *Frankenstein* (1931).

Baseball Hall of Famer Ty Cobb first suited up to play for the Detroit Tigers just three weeks after his mother accidentally shot and killed his father.

In 2019, the axe swung by Jack Nicholson in the 1980 film *The Shining* sold at a UK auction for 172,000 pounds (\$228,000 USD).

Philophobia is described as a fear of love or affection.

British racing driver Alan Stacey died during the 1960 Belgian Grand Prix when a bird struck him in the face, causing him to crash.

The green slime in 1995's *Demon Knight* was taken from countless glow sticks disassembled by the effects crew.

In 2013, a 107-year-old Arkansas man assaulted two people and was later killed following a shootout with the responding SWAT team.

It is an acceptable custom among the wealthy in China to hire professional mourners, typically young women paid by the family who are too busy to attend the funeral.

In 1952, a French doctor released a virus to kill rabbits on his property, resulting in the eradication of 90% of the country's rabbit population within two years.

If you're planning on being cryogenically frozen, the ideal time to start the procedure is within ten minutes of death.

To ensure continuity on *Carrie* (1976), Sissy Spacek chose to sleep in her bloody prom dress for three days.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
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SEND IT TO: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM

RECORDING OFFICER

[Signature]

FURTHER ACTION ☒

HOMICIDE ☐

EXPIRING MINDS

ON RUE MORGUE'S
SOCIAL MEDIA

What horror villain would make a good wrestler and why?

Freddy's got the personality and can cut a hell of a promo.

@2BORN0T2BMOVIES, VIA
INSTAGRAM

Rawhead Rex.... he all swole up.

ROCKY HALL, VIA FACEBOOK

Fans could chant "You suck!" at heel Dracula.

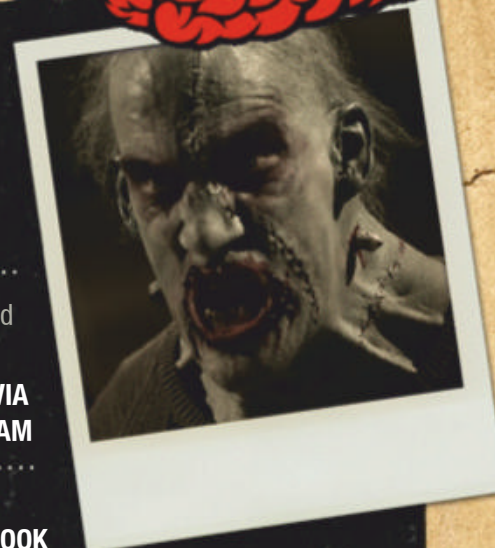
@THEMOVIEBUFF96, VIA INSTAGRAM

The Tall Man from *Phantasm*. He has the height, the strength, and the (silver) balls to do the job.

TYLER FLETCHER, VIA FACEBOOK

Pinhead. He comes with an entourage and sports some flashy gear. Oh, and he can definitely "pin" his opponent.

@BLLYDDPAETWR, VIA INSTAGRAM



FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA



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FINDING ELYSE'S BODY

Karyn Kusama's 2009 cult classic *Jennifer's Body* is a wonderfully queer demonic romp that uses humour and flair to navigate dark themes about what it means to be a young woman in a culture built by men (ironic for a film that was mis-marketed as "check out Megan Fox's tatas!"). When Fox's titular character is ritually sacrificed by a gaggle of Satan-worshipping dudebros to boost their band's success, her return as a bloodthirsty demonic maneater gives the audience an antihero to cheer for while observing the tragedy of her circumstances. Unfortunately, the real story the film was inspired by doesn't elicit the same catharsis.

Raised in a conservative Christian household in Arroyo Grande, California, fifteen-year-old high school student Elyse Pahler was known for being bubbly with a flair for the dramatic that caught the attention of classmates Royce Casey, Jacob Delashmutt, and Joseph Fiorella, who became obsessed with her. Convinced that sacrificing Pahler to Satan would make their death metal band more successful, they lured her to a secluded forest one fateful night in 1995 under

the guise of smoking some pot. Once there, the trio beat, stabbed, and strangled the girl until she bled to death. Casey eventually confessed to the crime, and the partially mummified body was found shortly thereafter. When Casey, Delashmutt, and Fiorella were sentenced to 25 to 26 years in prison, all they could offer as explanation for their crimes was that they truly believed Elyse was a "perfect sacrifice for the devil."

Satanic panic reared its head as Pahler's parents attempted to also sue the band Slayer, whose lyrics in "Postmortem" and "Dead Skin Mask" had supposedly inspired Fiorella to murder a virgin and achieve similar musical success. Ultimately, two attempts at a lawsuit were dismissed by judges, and in an interview co-conspirator Delashmutt conceded that Pahler wasn't killed because of Slayer's influence, but rather because "[Fiorella] was obsessed with her and with killing her."

It should be noted that screenwriter Diablo Cody has never directly stated that Pahler's murder influenced *Jennifer's Body* which, on the one hand, makes the whole situation more depressing as it implies that this kind of wanton murder is commonplace enough to work its way into art more as a trope than



as a direct influence. On the other hand, it's a testament to creatives like Kusama and Cody who layer satire into such seemingly senseless acts to let us confront them. The world often reminds us of the ways toxic masculinity ends in violence against women; sometimes it's nice to believe there's a pissed-off vengeance demon out there to burn it all down.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

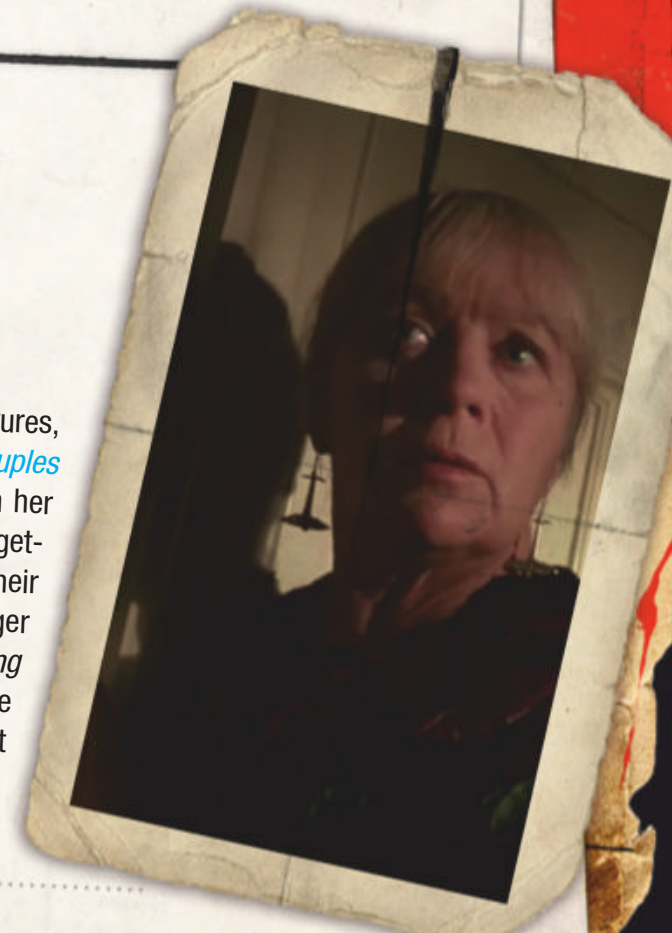
WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Mai Zetterling, "Helga" from *The Witches* (1990)

Released in February 1990 and traumatizing unsuspecting children ever since, *The Witches* provided a rare later-life acting role for renowned Swedish actor, director, and author Mai Zetterling, who would pass away just four years later at the age of 68. Having appeared in the Ingmar Bergman-scripted *Torment* in 1944, securing the title role in British drama *Frieda* (1947), and subsequently moving to Hollywood, she quickly grew disillusioned with the parts available to young actresses and returned to Europe. There, Zetterling

would direct documentaries, shorts, and features, including *The War Game* (1963), *Loving Couples* (1964), *Night Games* (1966) – adapted from her own novel – and *The Girls* (1968). Unapologetically feminist, experimental, and frank in their sexuality, Zetterling's output was no stranger to controversy, despite critical plaudits: *Loving Couples* was simultaneously nominated for the Palme d'Or and banned from public viewing at Cannes in 1965.

LOUIS FLETCHER



NEEDFUL THINGS



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Stash your abundance of personal beliefs in this faux-book box, inspired by the A24 film starring Hugh Grant. Bound in gold foil lettering, lined with black microsuède/wood veneer, and featuring a discreet locking mechanism, it's the perfect cover (get it?) for your most needful things.

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1



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Futuremonsters.com

2



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Justgeek.com

3



4 CREEPSHOW CARDIGAN

\$128 USD

Sweater weather needn't be a horror show when you can cozy up with *Creepshow*! Featuring the likeness of the immortal Creep on the front and nods to a few of your favourite stories on the sleeves, back, and trim, it's the sort of garment the most discerning horror fans will appreciate. Creep on!

Middleofbeyond.com

4



5 ICE NINE KILLS OFFICIAL COFFEE

\$21.99 USD

As a band that cut its fangs on spoofing popular horror hits, Ice Nine Kills' official collab with Concept Cafes is appropriately forked-tongue-in-cheek. In homage to the track of the same name from the 2021 album *The Silver Scream 2: Welcome to Horrorwood*, this Sip To Be Scared coffee blend is roasted to order and available in five grinds for all your caffeinating needs. Stay caffeinated, lest your mask of sanity slip.

Conceptcafes.com

5



HANDMADE HORRORS

DEADUNICORNLT



Nothing hits quite like a good horror comedy: from *Shaun of the Dead* to *An American Werewolf in London*, there's something immensely satisfying about screams interspersed with laughter.

It's something Lithuania-based artisan Daria of DeadUnicornLT believes as well, as evidenced in her humorously horrific figurines made out of polymer clay.

"Humour and horror are closely connected because of their ability to evoke strong emotions and break down conventional perceptions of the world around us," she tells *Rue Morgue*. "I use this contrast to create surreal images that are both scary and make you smile."

Continually searching for new ways to highlight this convergence for the past eight years, the self-taught sculptor got her start creating miniature hamburger earrings and decorative spoons before moving on to decidedly weirder fare. Now,



Daria's shop is bursting with colourful brooches, pendants, mugs, and more that draw the eye with beauty before revealing a ferocious bite. Her *Zubastiki* collection

(Russian for "critters"), for example, features lush flowers surrounding elongated

fangs or unnerving smiles nestled in ripe fruit.

"I'm a biologist and have always loved nature," she says, "but I'm also a horror fan, and I love that my work combines these two passions."

Many of her unique designs are custom pieces inspired by real creatures or beloved pets, which she approaches with great reverence and responsibility.

"People send me a photo of their pet, and we discuss every detail: the colour of fur, spots on the nose, even the shade of the whiskers," she says. "All of my Cat-Flowers have velvety faces, just like the real



animals. I help people choose the design of the petals so it looks harmonious."

Other pieces take inspiration from the intersection of the natural world with the human body, including skull cherries and strawberry brooches featuring a human vulva.

"To me, this represents femininity and unity with nature," she says, noting that not everyone can pull off such provocative jewellery. "For each person, it will be a challenge both to society and to themselves. These pieces are about courage, self-acceptance, and a reminder that our body is a work of art, not something dirty or shameful."

Want to challenge societal taboos or immortalize your pet as a Zubastiki? Find [DeadUnicornLT](#) on Etsy.

JENN ADAMS



CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

LIVING DEAD DOLLS PRESENTS *PSYCHO*'S NORMAN BATES AND MARION CRANE

(Mezco Toyz, 2013)

Collectibles company Mezco Toyz paid tribute to Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 masterpiece in 2013 when it released figures of Norman and Marion as part of its incredibly popular "Living Dead Dolls Presents" line of horror movie-themed dolls. Standing roughly ten inches tall, eachposable doll features rooted hair and is outfitted with fabric clothing. Norman is dressed in Mother's checkered print dress and sports a removable wig, pants, socks, and shoes, along with a miniature butcher knife, while the Marion doll (with screaming mouth!) comes wrapped in a white

Bates Motel towel. Both figures feature a black-and-white scheme to reflect the look of the Hitchcock classic and are housed in fantastically designed window display boxes that combine to recreate the famous shower scene. Both dolls can usually be found together as a set on [eBay](#) for around \$300.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM



ICON AND ICONOCLAST **CLIVE BARKER** HAS BEEN MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF HIS OWN DARK DRUM SINCE BREAKING OUT AS A GENRE SUPERSTAR SOME FOUR DECADES AGO. AND THOUGH THE PAST FEW YEARS HAVE TAKEN A GRAVE TOLL ON HIS HEALTH AND FRIENDSHIPS (AND EVEN NEARLY CLAIMED HIS LIFE), HE HAS SURVIVED... AND CONTINUES TO DEFY RULES TO CREATE NEW TERRORS AND NEW VISIONS THAT FLOUT CONVENTION

BOOK OF BLOOD

BY **ANDREA SURISSATI**
INTERVIEW BY **MAJO PAVLOVIC**

While many of us know the name “Clive Barker” in terms of his horror fiction output – both cinematic and literary – he’s actually an artistic multi-hyphenate, a polymath in the truest sense of the term. In the *Imaginer* book series, an eight-volume hardcover art book series compiled by Clive Barker archivists Phil and Sarah Stokes, Barker dubs himself an “imaginer,” and the painter/poet/playwright/author/actor/director does appear to create from a reality of his own invention. An artist in every possible sense, Barker is a compulsive creator, whose output is as unruly and uncontainable as it is combative and confrontational, pouring forth from him in every manner available, be it the canvas or the page.

If you haven’t heard his name in a while, it’s because health issues have plagued the Liverpool-born septuagenarian in recent years, but that’s not to say the imaginer has been idle. As I prepared for this cover story, he asked me how much art I’d need from him to illustrate the feature and I replied, over the phone, “Everything; send me everything.” Pause. Barker: “Are dicks and pussies okay?” “Let *us* worry about dicks and pussies – send me everything.”

Upon visiting his Beverly Hills home last year, I realized my request was frankly preposterous: the building is stuffed to the rafters with his art – eight-foot canvases were stacked ten-deep along every wall, stacks of sketches and works-in-progress filled every flat surface; the creative disorder of a man possessed.

For himself, Barker was lively in spite of it being his 72nd birthday, happy to compare notes on the year’s horror films and the then-upcoming election while his fiercely protective parrot

Malingo eyed me suspiciously, no doubt wondering what my eyeballs tasted like. He told me a great anecdote about how one of his earliest magazine cover gigs was destroyed in the UK for profanity (hence the dicks and pussies concern) and how he was formally invited to attend the destruction of that artwork, as if it were a criminal being executed. He spoke about the incident with some pride; a sparkle in his eye that made me imagine a young artist at the precipice of a career of pushing the envelope, prodding the sleeping bear, and provoking a legion of ardent fans ready to see and hear something truly fucked

up. It struck me then, as we chatted about the state of the genre and the world in general, what tremendous confidence it must have taken for him to persevere at his art in spite of his own country telling him that his stuff is too indecent to even exist. Ever the *enfant terrible*, even at that early stage, he was ready for a career in a world that wasn’t ready for him.

Lo and behold, *Hellraiser*: Barker’s feature-length directorial debut and the breakout hit that sank its hooks so deeply into audiences that it seemed as though the world was finally hungry for the titillation of the previously forbidden. Barker became a household name, uttered alongside other genre greats of the era: Carpenter, Hooper, Craven. More movie deals followed, art shows and books, their

only commonality being that prickly sense of something primal, inexorable, human and monstrous at the same time. Barker’s work is both singular and diverse, and any viewer who happened upon *Candyman* or *Nightbreed* and dared look deeper into their creator was rewarded with a whole universe of pure, blackened fantasy.



Self Portrait



It must have seemed, then, at the peak of his most popular and transgressive work, that the world was finally ready for a mind like Clive Barker's. But Hollywood did as Hollywood tends to do: gnaw on the bones of past successes and demand more of the same. It's something any filmmaker must contend with after hitting it big out the gates, but Barker isn't the sort of artist content to wash, rinse, and repeat for the sake of dividends. And yet, as we sat in his living room almost four decades later, surrounded by giant canvases, his only bitterness came when we discussed the rise in hate crime, the decline of faith in democracy, and the imminent backslide of what seemed like inevitable societal progress. Barker might live in relative isolation alongside his library of books and platoon of imaginary spectres, but he's far from out of touch.

If the mood turned grim, it was only momentary – I left the visit with a stack of the aforementioned *Imaginer* books, an autographed copy of his 1992 dark fantasy novel *The Thief of Always*, and that weird, surreal feeling of having met someone larger than life. But still, it occurs to me that the world has never been quite ready for a talent like Barker's, and likely never will be – a fact that makes me all the more grateful that we have his work to hold up as testimony to his true artistic genius and one of the best minds our genre has ever seen. In addition to his work, connecting with fans has been among his great passions, and although his convention appearances may stall as health matters arise, rest assured that he's busily working away in that living room, spattered, as always, in red paint.

Rue Morgue is proud to reconnect her readers with the great imaginer himself, Clive Barker.

How are you and what's new in the City of Angels?

I'm good. I'm overworked, but that's fine. We got a lot of things going on. I'm writing the sequel to *The Thief of Always* right now, which is called *Deep Hill*; I'm writing a story about the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands, which is called *A World Without Witnesses*; I'm writing a story about the Nativity but told from a very strange point of view; and I'm preparing a third *Book of the Art*.

Deep Hill is a sequel to The Thief of Always?

Officially a sequel, yes. I won't send it to my publishers until the end of the year, but it's a narrative which carries on pretty directly from the end of *The Thief of Always*. In other words, it's genuinely a sequel. I really want to keep it secret, because what it does is pretty radical. Lulu is in it, Harvey is in it, Wendell is in it, and part of the "Hood clan" is in it. I'm giving a bit too much away there, but it's really going to be for [fans]. It's going to be a direct continuation of the narrative.

Over the years, you've worked with huge studios adapting your written work – we can't



***Demons To Some:* A Young Barker with long-time friend and collaborator Doug Bradley.**

talk about the horror genre without mentioning Hellraiser or Candyman. Is there something you would like to do in movies or a TV series, which could be completely different from your previous work?

Now you catch me in a quandary because the answer is yes, and the answer is also that I have two things which are not yet signed – that is, the contracts are not yet signed – but will be exactly that. They will be adaptations in a series form for television. One of them is *Weaveworld* and the producer, if it happens – and I stress if it happens – is a wonderful lady who completely understands the book. My heart is on my sleeve when I say this: I so want this to work. But I've learned over the years that you can't bet on anything. In cinema, companies change, finances change. Creative people change. And we have, for instance, a director who I cannot name right now because nothing is signed, who wants to do *The Thief of Always* as a live-action movie. I can't tell you who she is right now, but I can't imagine another director who, based on her previous work, has shown that she is exactly the right person for this project.

That is fantastic news but, I have to say, sex is also important in your work.

I didn't notice that.

I personally love to read about alien lovers or monsters coupling with humans. Is it complicated to pitch movie ideas when the story includes, say, gay love?

To be a movie? Almost impossible. Unfortunately, you know very, very well from my work and from conversations that we've had over the years that the content of my material is often sexualized and it should be sexualized in a radical way. That is to say, there are all kinds of intercourses, whether it be something like "The Skins of the Fathers" [from *Books of Blood v2*] where a woman makes love to extremely alien things, or "In

the Hills, the Cities" [*Books of Blood v1*] where the protagonists are two male lovers. There has been immense difficulty getting this material published. My publishers in England, when I first wrote them, refused to publish it, simply refused, and warned me that if I did publish it – remember, this is my first book – I will destroy my career; I was 32, I think, very early in my career. I had a choice: I could either follow my instincts, follow my desire to tell my truth, such as it was, or I could retreat into silence or censored versions of my truth. And here I was with my first publisher, the first person to publish me, saying, "No, we will not publish you if you try to publish the story." And to be fair to them, they were trying to protect me, they thought I was being naive. They thought I was being trusting and I shouldn't be trusting, and that if I publish the book, I would be rejected wholesale by any potential readers the future might bring to me. I said, I'm going to publish anyway.

I agree there's no point in making anything if you're going to censor yourself, you'll just end up suppressing the vision.

You're gonna suppress the vision, that's the word. I know you know this, but I'll say it anyway. Very often, people were saying no, and they're not bad people. They're not disrupted people. The people were trying to make money for their publishing company. And they believed that if an unknown writer, as I was then, comes along and publishes material which is not just similar with the tastes of most readers, then they will alienate those readers. I think that's a mistake. I think a reader is far more intelligent, far more responsive than these people are giving them credit for.

You and Stephen King are two original masters of horror who are still working very hard, still extremely popular, and bringing joy to the fans worldwide. Is there any chance we

"VERY EARLY IN MY CAREER I HAD A CHOICE: I COULD EITHER FOLLOW MY INSTINCTS, FOLLOW MY DESIRE TO TELL MY TRUTH, SUCH AS IT WAS, OR I COULD RETREAT INTO SILENCE OR CENSORED VERSIONS OF MY TRUTH."

— CLIVE BARKER

might see you working together?

We talked about that, and I said no because we don't like each other. I certainly appreciate what he does, and he certainly appreciates what I do, but we are very different. Our vision of the world and [our ways of] seeing the world are radically different things. And I think that's what makes us strong. There's a wonderful, social deception in Steve's writing. He writes about the world from the inside out; I write the world from an outside in. I start with the strangest fucking shit that in my mind I can conjure, and then I bring it into the world. Steve starts with the real stuff and then puts into that world strange and terrible things.

How about David Cronenberg? He's been making some new body horror films lately.

Absolutely! He and I worked [together] before, with him as an actor, of course, in *Nightbreed*, which both of us had a great time doing, but he and I also go back to very different ways. Can I go back to what I just said about Steve? David's worldview and mine are totally different, and I think I'd have a fear that you would not see the best of either of us. This is true of Steve, David, and myself: I'm a very solitary creator. I'm sitting here in my writing room surrounded by nineteen projects right now, some of which are very close to finishing, some of which are not. I work seven days a week every week and to the end, because I'm obsessed with telling stories and making images. And I know, judging by Steve's output, that's also true for him. I don't know what his writing regimen is like, but he writes a lot. So do I. It's my obsession.

Can we expect a new art exhibition anytime soon?

We're organizing that right now. I don't wanna go into the complexities of organizing this material, but on the table behind me, there's 2000 drawings and none of them have been seen by anybody. Some of them are very, very simple, and some of them are extremely complex. I am frankly a little overwhelmed by the work. As you

know, as most people reading this will know, I've been very sick for a long time. I was in hospital, I have been in the hospital a lot, and I came close to death some years ago. So, I'm not able to necessarily organize with the same energy that I once did, and I'm looking to other people to help me do the organizing because I am overwhelmed by the material, by the amount of material.

I'm glad that you have people surrounding you, willing to help.

Yes, in the house right now are my husband, Roman Barker, and my best friend, Paulo Lorca. They've been helping me dig in. I've been sick for a long time and unable to walk, but I would still continue to sit at my desk and write and draw. All I've been able to do is fill a page with writing or drawing and then search the floor and hope somebody else will pick it up. That sounds like a joke, but it isn't. It's a physical impossibility for me to keep all the work I'm doing organized. I'm just simply producing it. Luckily, I have near and devoted friends who helped me keep it all in order. It takes a huge weight off me as a creator to know that when I finish a drawing on a page, I can put it in a pile and there will be some guy I trust to col-



SOMEWHERE ATOP BEVERLY HILLS IN HOLLYWOOD, **CLIVE BARKER** SHARES HIS HOME WITH A VAST AND EVER-GROWING COMPANY OF OTHERWORLDLY CREATURES THAT SPILL DAY AND NIGHT FROM HIS FERVID BRUSH. WE ARE ONLY TOO HONOURED TO SHOWCASE SOME OF OUR FAVOURITES

A GALLERY OF BARKER'S BEASTS

BY **ANDREA SUBISSATI**

While continuing health issues may have stalled some of Clive Barker's creative output, his painting hand has picked up any slack; there's more than one way to skin a cat, they say, and Barker's beasts will evidently find any way they can to manifest themselves into existence.

Perusing the canvases piled in every nook and cranny of his Beverly Hills home reveals an imagination that stretches far beyond what can be conveyed verbally, even for a writer as gifted as he. What's more, his paintings are staggeringly varied in style and scope: from abstract cityscapes with strange architecture to impressionist, dreamlike tableaux that are practically scraped onto the canvas; they range from explicit and challenging to hauntingly beautiful, unified only in their utter lack of creative restraint.

A "Beasts of Barker" gallery was actually Barker's idea, and *Rue Morgue* is only too happy to indulge the man with this selection of our favourites, culled from his immense collection. You may recognize some of these fiends from his fiction (the 2002 fantasy novel *Abarat*, in particular, was fertile ground for some of these characters), but one thing is certain: he still has such sights to show us. 🩸

1. "Mater Motley"
2. "Two Witches"
3. "Appetite"
4. "Leeman Vol"
5. "The Executioner"
6. "Christopher Carrion"
7. "There is Light In Him Still"
8. "Untitled"



tain:



3



5



6



7



4



8



"I'M A VERY SOLITARY CREATOR"

— CLIVE BARKER

lect it all up. And so, when I finish the piece, it's there for me. I've had, unfortunately, in the past, unreliable assistance, should we say? People who, all too often, were more interested in what they can sell from my work than what they could preserve and keep safe. And so, when I started to get well, I looked around for a lot of the work and didn't find it; it had been stolen. I'm past weeping about that. It's gone, but it has made me a lot more conservative about the people I choose to work with.

Can you give us a sense of what your life is like these days, a breakdown of a typical day?

It's a very easy answer. I don't leave the house at all right now because of health issues. Except, I've done a convention just recently, and I'll do two more in the autumn. But getting around is a little difficult and I'm afraid of falling, so no big dramas. I'm staying here, close to the work, and there's a lot of work to do, good work.

Looking back over your entire career, is there a project that you wish you could have made?

You mean like a project? You mean a movie? You know, I've been very lucky. All the paintings I want to paint, I paint. All the books I want to write, I write. All the poetry I want to set down, I set down. I suppose you could say that cinema is a little more frustrating because I don't have complete control over it. And you know, I've had problems — clearly with *Nightbreed* — dealing with people who wanted to interfere with the work. But that doesn't happen anywhere else in my life, so I'm blessed, I think. When I worked in theatre, I wrote and directed many plays, and again, I had no problems. So, given the problems that so many people have, I have very few. If I were still to be 40 and I could make a movie of one of my projects, I think I'd probably go for *Weaveworld*.

Do you have any sense of how your work changed and continues to change the horror genre?

I don't write horror anymore. And even though the work which I'm working on right now has very, very dark things in it, it isn't like the, you know, really extreme, gotcha-by-the-throat kind of story that "*The Midnight Meat Train*" was, for instance. That said, the stories that I am writing

at the moment for this new collection are very, very psychologically dark. They're much, much more psychologically dark than anything in the *Books of Blood*. The *Books of Blood* were visceral; they were about the body being violated very often. They were about sex, of course, but they weren't sickly psychological. How do I say this? We are in this world now, going through a very, very, very, very dark period, particularly here in America, and the work I'm doing now reflects that.

You are the renaissance man of horror. Looking back, what brought you the most satisfaction? Writing? Painting? Theatre or filmmaking? Novels, short stories, or comic books, and why?

This is a wonderful question, and I have only the simplest of answers: all of them. I know it sounds silly, but back in the day when I wanted to write short stories, I went away and wrote short stories. When I wanted to change my direction and write big fantasy novels, I went into my room and sat and wrote *Weaveworld*. I didn't sell the books ahead of time, I wasn't in contract with anybody. I delivered *Weaveworld* finished and without any deal. Which was a risk in a way, because I was known for horror, and *Weaveworld* isn't horror, but the response was amazing, so much more than I had expected. I used to get £2000 for three books: three *Books of Blood* and they give me £2000, which isn't a lot of money. When I wrote *Weaveworld*, my agent took it to HarperCollins, who I'd never met. They called me into a breakfast meeting in a very fancy place in London, and there was champagne on the table and all this stuff. I'd never seen this kind of publishing before — I'd lived in the confines of a publisher who produced little paperbacks, so I never had a hardcover. So they said, "Here's the number we want to give you," and I said, "Well, what is it?" He said, "It's on this piece of paper," and they passed me this paper and it had £250,000 written on it. That's what they bought *Weaveworld* for, and it changed my life. I won recognition. Writing isn't for everybody; it's a very unreliable profession in the sense that when you write something, you have no idea whether it's going to be liked or disliked. And you spend a year, maybe two years writing it. *Weaveworld*, it was a two-year project. So I was writing for two years, not knowing whether I was even doing the right

thing. And that's where the magic comes in.

I'm curious, how have the taboos surrounding gay sex and kink changed over the years, and do they still interest you?

I think that by and large, the societies we both live in are just as repressed and fucked up about sex and kink and fetish as they ever were. I don't think that society has really changed that much since I made *Hellraiser* in terms of its views upon these subjects that tend to get pushed in the corner. Yes, we all know that people have those interests, but we also know that by and large, people repress them. They wouldn't go down to the local pub and say, "Let's talk about what I did with my girlfriend last night." We live in a world which is dominated by church. In America right now, the evangelical vote has essentially repressed the rights of women to control their own bodies. That is a big bottom to me. It's so cruel. And, you know, it's not just cruel to the women, it's cruel to the children who may be born of those pregnancies, because they won't be welcomed into the world the way an ordinary baby is and the one thing we know about children is that the adult will be stronger if he or she is loved as a child.

You have written so much about the extremes of human experience. Do you have any beliefs regarding death and what it may bring afterwards?

There is no death. There's a condition of ourselves, which says that the body we reside in is not going to be around for long. You're talking to a man who embalms people; you're talking to a man who's done autopsies. I mean, I know what death looks like, I know what it smells like, all that stuff. But the person isn't there, right? The person's moved on. Consciousness, the game God plays with us, is not a reality. It's not a grim reality. It means that we are erased the moment we stop breathing. The scientist who is honest will say he doesn't even know where consciousness exists within the body. We can't point to any part of the brain and say, that's where Clive lives. That's where Majo lives. There isn't a place. We may as well say it exists in our hearts, or our dicks, or our, you know, little fingers. This is all a massive mystery. 🐝




ALTHOUGH HE IS BEST KNOWN FOR HIS WORK IN FILM, NOVELS, AND PAINT, **CLIVE BARKER** IS ALSO A PROLIFIC POET. HE WAS MOVED TO SHARE A COUPLE OF HIS RECENT CREATIONS WITH US AFTER NEWS REACHED THE WORLD OF TONY (CANDYMAN) TODD'S UNTIMELY PASSING THIS PAST NOVEMBER

THE LANGUAGE OF DREAMS & NIGHTMARES

I know that for some readers, poetry is hard work. It's nothing like ordinary speech. But neither, if you think about it, is the speech I create for The Hell Priest or Candyman. Several of my novels are also written in stylized language; *Imajica* and *Chiliad* come to mind. Poetic speech serves a profound purpose for me. It allows the readers and the characters to escape the debased, raw language of a television ad and delivers us into a higher place – almost like song – where we can speak the strange language of dreams or nightmares. Last night, writing about the beauty of our friend Tony Todd, I watched him speaking that higher language in [*Candyman*]. Nobody did it better. I wept with gratitude that Tony was there to interpret so eloquently the words his character spoke. I believe in the afterlife. I hope Tony hears us now, celebrating his gift.


Thank you, my friends, for sharing my love for this extraordinary artist. He was with us too briefly.

My love to you all,
Clive




BUT O!
LIFE IS SHORT,
AND PLEASURES FEW.
AND HOLED THE SHIP,
AND DROWNED THE CREW.
BUT O! BUT O!
HOW VERY BLUE THE SEA IS.
- CLIVE BARKER

A LIFE
UPON A MICK WHITE DAWN,
IN SUMMER'S MIDST,
THE DRAGONFLY SHEDS ITS CARVAL FORM
AND WAKES TO ITS FIRST AND FINAL DAY.
NEVER AFTER THIS WILL IT FOLD
IT'S GLASS AND PAPER WINGS.
ITS ONLY LIFE IS NOW;
TO REST IS DEATH.



THE SUNCIT HOURS
ARE SO BUSY WITH COURTSHIP AND
CONQUEST
THAT IT BARELY SEES THE SHADOWS
THAT TWILIGHT BRINGS
WHILE TIME PLAYS ONE LAST GAME,
HIDING ITS EYES
AND COUNTING TO ETERNITY.
- CLIVE BARKER



WOLFCOP DIRECTOR **LOWELL DEAN** CUTS AN EVIL SLICE OF FUN WITH **DARK MATCH**, HIS VIOLENT AND GORY NEW FILM SET IN THE WORLD OF '80s CANADIAN PRO WRESTLING





Tag Team Of Terror: (From left) Chris “The Prophet” Jericho, writer/director Lowell Dean, Leo “Lazarus Smashley” Fafard, and the film’s high-flying final girl, Ayisha “Miss Behave” Issa.

Like a lot of '80s kids, Lowell Dean, 45, was a big fan of wrestling growing up in Saskatchewan, Canada. But the future writer/director of the *Wolfcop* movies lost interest in the WWF (now the WWE) in his teens. It wasn't until 2011 that his fandom was rekindled when he was invited to a match put on by Regina-based High Impact Wrestling.

“I didn't want to go,” he admits. “[I thought] ‘I’m too old for wrestling, that’s for kids.’ So, I was dragged along and sat on my hands for the first few minutes, like ‘Why am I here?’ By the end of the night, I had lost my voice from screaming. I realized that if you’re not the person who is participating, you are the fool. And I found it this weird, joyous, cathartic release to just be primal and screaming.”

Dean shared his renewed interest with friends and wound up attending a big WWE event in Regina in 2017. That event sparked an idea, and that idea hits Shudder on January 31.

“There was a moment where a character came out and, on their walking into the ring, the whole arena was losing it,” he recalls of that moment. “They’re performing moves in unison, and my brain is like ‘This is a cult!’ And that was the light bulb moment of, ‘What if this *was* a cult?’”

Set in 1988, *Dark Match* stars Montreal-born Ayisha Issa (*Warm Bodies*) as Miss Behave, a “heel” (villain) in a small-time Canadian prairie wrestling league who yearns for the adulation (and payout) enjoyed by the “faces” (heroes). But she is reluctant to participate in a big money not-open-to-the-public “dark match,” especially when she finds out it’s being held in a remote town run by the mysterious Leader (wrestling superstar and *Terrifier 3* actor Chris Jericho). Her instincts turn out to be right on the rotten money when their benefactors reveal themselves to be

a cult out to sacrifice her entire lineup to the ultimate baddie... Satan. With a synopsis like that, you may be thinking *Dark Match* veers close to a Mexican *luchador* horror movie (see sidebar p.23), but Dean insists there was a more personal aspect to the story for him.

“I FEEL A GREAT KINSHIP WITH WRESTLERS; THE WAY THEY ABUSE THEIR BODIES, I FEEL I ABUSE MY MIND.”

— WRITER/DIRECTOR LOWELL DEAN

“It was a metaphor for me and my career,” he says of writing *Dark Match*. “I feel a great kinship with wrestlers; the way they abuse their bodies, I feel I abuse my mind. Sometimes you feel like you’re not being paid what you should be or what you were promised. You’re working yourself to the bone to entertain – at what cost? I’ve made six films to date, and every one has been such a mountain to climb. I never know how I’m going to get the next one financed. You think ‘This is how you make a film’ – and the rules completely change, the industry changes, and you’re back to square one.”

Having pieced together the basic story structure for the movie, Dean started researching professional wrestling in earnest. He watched

old matches on YouTube, the Netflix series *Glow*, and documentaries such as *Beyond the Mat* and *Dark Side of the Ring*. He also read interviews with '80s wrestlers in order to get an authentic sense of what it would be like for an amateur wrestling company on the Canadian prairie circuit back in the 1980s.

“Literally, as I came across the term ‘dark match,’ I was like ‘That’s my title!’ It was as simple as that – ‘dark match: a non-televvised event.’ You see those words and say, ‘That’s what I’m making.’”

Dean also threw himself into research into the occult to give his small-town Canadian Satanists a patina of authenticity. It’s an interest, he says, that takes up about half of the books he buys and which he attributes to being raised “very” Catholic.

“There’s always something a little fascinating about religion,” he allows. “And I think if everyone’s going to validate religion then people are going to say, even to this day, ‘No, this is real, and this is what I believe in, and it’s powerful.’ And I’m like, ‘There has to be another side to that. How can you believe so much in Christianity being the only way and being the true moral centre to live your life if you don’t believe there may be something else hiding in the darkness?’ So, I’m always fascinated by the occult, and obviously that leans heavily into this film and the Satanic Panic of it all, as that other big hallmark of the '80s.”

Dark Match reunites Dean with many of his *Wolfcop* collaborators, including Jonathan Cherry as league manager Rusty; Leo Fafard as “face” Lazarus Smashley; and makeup effects supervisor Emersen Ziffle, the designer of the much-loved *Wolfcop* makeup. Dean, who shot *Dark Match* in late 2022 in Alberta, appreciates

WITH THE ANTICIPATED RELEASE OF LOWELL DEAN'S *DARK MATCH* JUST AROUND THE CORNER, *RUE MORGUE* LOOKS AT THE PHENOMENON OF LUCHA LIBRE HORROR CINEMA, WHERE MASKED HEROES BATTLE THE FORCES OF DARKNESS, AND DANGER LURKS BEHIND EVERY SHADOW



Hulk Hogan, Jesse “The Body” Ventura, John Cena, Dave Bautista, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson... many pro wrestlers have crossed over from the squared circle to the silver screen. But it was “Rowdy” Roddy Piper who first laid the path for his brethren to not only act in genre films, but star in them as well. That moment came when horror legend John Carpenter cast the silver-tongued grappler in the lead role of his genre-bending, horror sci-fi action film *They Live*.

But the roots of wrestling and horror cinema stretch back much further, to 1950s Mexico, which began a period of film influenced by Universal Monster movies, Hammer horror, sci-fi classics, and even German Expressionism, often featuring vampires, werewolves, Aztec mummies, mad scientists, and of course... *wrestlers*! Forged out of the flames of Mexploitation cinema came one of the most unique and bizarre subgenres ever: *lucha libre* horror, a unique fusion of Mexican culture, lucha libre wrestling, and classic horror.

During the 1950s, the Mexican film industry was in upheaval due to strict government controls and the emergence of television, which offered a convenient, low-cost alternative to the theatrical experience. In response, Mexican B-movie producers capitalized on the growing popularity of Mexican wrestling, resulting in over 200 movies that featured real wrestlers fighting an assortment

**YOUR HANDY GUIDE
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**VIVA LA
LUCHA
HORROR!**

BY MICHAEL PASZT

SANTO VS. THE VAMPIRE WOMEN

Alfonso Corona Blake (1962)



One of few Santo movies to see American distribution. In it, Santo is tapped by Professor Orlof to rescue his daughter Diana from a centuries-old vampire curse, pitting the legendary luchador against vampires, werewolves, and assorted henchmen before he speeds off in his convertible!

SANTO AND BLUE DEMON VS. THE MONSTERS

Gilberto Martínez Solares (1970)



The terrible Dr. Halder has been brought back to life to

seek revenge against El Santo and Blue Demon. And this time he's brought a slew of horrifying monsters to help him, which include the Wolf Man, the Mummy, Cyclops, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, zombies, vampires, and even Frankenstein's monster!

THE MUMMIES OF GUANAJUATO

Federico Curiel (1972)

Based on the true historical account of naturally mummified bodies discovered in Guanajuato, Mexico, this one sees Santo go mask-to-mask against Satan, the mummy of a powerful sorcerer with a deadly vendetta against the city and its inhabitants. Come for the revenants, stay for the flamethrowers!



of horror movie villains.

Leading the charge was El Santo (a.k.a. actor Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta) whose prolific output made him a folk hero icon. On the silver screen, El Santo took on everyone and everything from werewolves, aliens, witches, vampire women, to Dracula, the Mummy, and even Frankenstein's monster. The resulting films were bizarre and surreal, and in the world of exploitation cinema, they are masterpieces.

Yet another important ingredient to lucha libre horror cinema came as a result of officials within Mexico's Ministry of the Interior banning wrestling from national television. Producers seized on this as an opportunity to ride on the massive popularity of lucha libre and began to incorporate wrestling matches into the films, resulting in lengthy lucha fights hilariously shoehorned into the film's plot. Suddenly, wrestling fans could not only see their favourite luchadores in the movies, they could watch them wrestle too.

In 2018, lucha libre was officially declared "an integral part of the culture of Mexico" by the government and, to this day, it's safe to say that a wrestling event is going on across the country every night of the week. Mexico City has become the epicentre for this phenomenon with the Cathedral of Wrestling (La Arena Mexico) and La Arena Coliseo, home to the CMLL (Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre), the oldest wrestling company in the world today.

That legacy, of course, was built by the legendary names of El Santo, Blue Demon, Mil Máscaras, Médico Asesino, Gori Guerrero, Rolando Vera, "El Cavernario" Galindo, Karloff Lagarde, Ray Mendoza, and Huracán Ramírez – just a few of the titans who have graced these hallowed halls and left their mark on celluloid. 🤘



Mexploitation Nation: Whether a baby-faced hero (top: **Santo vs. the Vampire Women**) or heel from hell (**El Gigante**), luchadores have achieved icon status in the horror genre.

SANTO AND BLUE DEMON VS. DRACULA AND THE WOLFMAN

Miguel M. Delgado (1973)

In a tag team battle for the ages, Santo teams up with Blue Demon to fight the infamous Count, his pet lycanthrope, and their legion of followers, culminating in a match that takes place over a pit of spikes!



EL GIGANTE (SHORT)

Gigi Saul Guerrero and Luke Bramley (2014)

A rare example of a masked lucha as the villain rather than the hero, this short film is a grindhouse mash-up of lucha libre and *The Hills*

Have Eyes, with an ending that's sure to turn your stomach!

LOWLIFE

Ryan Prows (2017)

This modern classic sets a contemporary luchador, El Monstruo, in a body-trafficking scheme that unfolds through looping timelines and multiple character POVs. A dark comedy that eschews conventional wrestling scenes in favour of buckets of gore, *Low-life* is a crowd-pleaser and a near-perfect midnight film. 🤘



working with people he can trust and who know what he wants.

"Whether it's a department head or an actor, when you find someone who is in your rhythm or pace, it's a huge advantage to work with them again," he says. "Emersen and I are very close, we work together all the time. Even before I make a film, he's someone who reads the first draft of the script. When we start the film and he's officially hired, that's someone I don't even have to speak to very much. The same goes for Leo and Cherry."

I'M ALWAYS FASCINATED BY THE OCCULT, AND OBVIOUSLY THAT LEANS HEAVILY INTO THIS FILM AND THE SATANIC PANIC OF IT ALL."

— WRITER/DIRECTOR
LOWELL DEAN

A key new collaborator is director of photography Karim Hussain, who eschews his highly stylized work in fellow Canadian director Brandon Cronenberg's films *Possessor* and *Infinity Pool* in favour of a grungy, lo-fi aesthetic more in keeping with the grimy world of *Dark Match*.

"Obviously I was very blessed to have Karim Hussain as my DP," says Dean. "Part of the reason we would be a match made in heaven — or hell, I guess would be more appropriate — [is that] in our first conversations, he is someone who is very 'This is what it needs.' He's not flirting with it; he knows and he *knew* immediately. When it would say in my script 'We're watching on VHS,' he's like, 'Are you going to shoot on VHS?' Karim had the balls to say, 'We're actually shooting on VHS. It's going to be standard definition blown up to make it look even worse.' So, I knew I was immediately in safe hands with him because everything we did was within financial reason to make it feel authentic."

Similarly, Dean was excited to work for the first time with former WWE star Chris Jericho. A big horror fan himself, including Dean's *Wolf-cop* films, Jericho is cast as a megalomaniacal ex-wrestler who leverages his fame and charisma as "The Prophet" into heading a satanic cult as its leader. As a wrestling legend with his fair share of devoted fans, Jericho recognizes the kind of scary devotion his character gets from his followers.

"There's a lot of fans that I have that you see



A Reckoning In The Ring: (from top) Montreal native and former Brazilian jiu-jitsu champion Ayisha Issa brings her athleticism to *Dark Match*'s choreographed carnage, and Jonathan Lepine demonstrates a non-regulation move as "Thick."

everywhere," he says, "and you think, 'If I just pointed at them and said 'Kill!' they might do it!' It's a little bit beyond fandom. So you can see how a cult leader could prey on weak-minded people or people that just want to be a part of something. So that made perfect sense to me, especially in this crazy little town. We've seen it in a lot of movies; he runs the town and they're all under his spell. And they're all going for the same thing, which is this world destruction via Beelzebub."

While the Leader is trying to bring his apocalyptic fantasy to life via satanic ritual and human sacrifice, the majority of *Dark Match* is set in the real world — one where heroes travel in broken-down vans through harsh Canadian winters to matches where they will earn far less than they deserve. It's an interesting contrast with the pro wrestling concept of kayfabe — in which the fantasy we see in the ring supposedly extends into the "real" world.

"I wanted it to feel depressing," Dean says of the wrestling world of *Dark Match*. "I wanted [*Dark Match*] to feel sad and cold and real; I think

that's the Saskatchewan in me. I think there is a rugged toughness to the prairies of 'Just get the job done,' whether you're putting on a mask and tights or you're going to a job site. I wanted it to feel grounded and real and not exciting."

Fortunately, Dean only partly succeeded, as the wrestling and action sequences are exhilarating thanks to Jericho and the rest of the cast, some of whom are real-life Edmonton-area wrestlers. Even so, both Dean and Jericho agree that though wrestling is key to their film, *Dark Match* is not really a wrestling movie.

"It's like *The Walking Dead* is not a zombie show," says Jericho. "Zombies are in the background, but it's more than that. [Prior to signing on,] I started getting into it and reading it and putting myself in the position of these wrestlers, [and I thought] 'This could have been me when I first started!' Rural Alberta looks like this movie! You go to freaking Balzac, Alberta, for a show on a Saturday night. This could have happened to me had, you know, there been some nefariousness there..." 🧛



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AFTER THREE DECADES, ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST AND MOST BELOVED HORROR BOOKSTORES IS CLOSING ITS DOORS

Dark Delicacies Goes Dark

BY **MONICA S. KUEBLER**

It's the end of an era – an overused phrase, sure, but nonetheless a fitting one when reflecting on the upcoming closure of Dark Delicacies, the Burbank, California, horror boutique that has been a destination for locals and tourists alike for 30 years. There's another popular saying that's also apropos: all good things must end. But for Dark Delicacies' owners, who are retiring from the retail rat race, closing shop ultimately means more freedom to keep doing what they love.

"I'm 71," says Del Howison of the decision. "My wife is 74, and I want to do more writing. I want to do more acting. I've done [the store] for 30 years. We proved that we could do it, and they couldn't drive us out. So that's done. Plus, I just renewed the trademark with the government. So I have the trademark for another ten years, and we can do conventions, we can do pop-ups, we can do online. We're actually freeing Dark Delicacies up where we can do other things with it."

Keeping the lights on in a mom-and-pop specialty shop for three decades is no small feat, especially considering the dramatic sea changes that have buffeted retailers during this time. First came the big box stores with their deep discounts, then the head-spinning arrival of Amazon, and the shift from physical media to digital – all things that needed to be confronted and overcome. But when Dark Delicacies first opened

on December 3, 1994, those things were still far in the future. At the time, Howison's wife Sue was working for Nestle, but the pair dreamed of doing something more rewarding.

"We had talked about [opening a store]," Howison says, "and my mom, when she passed away, had left \$5000 for me to do whatever I wanted with. Huge amount, yes. And Sue said at one point a store would be nice. I went by this place about three blocks from our house and went in and saw it, talked to the guy, and went home and said, 'Sue, I found your store.'"

"IT WAS FUN. IT WAS ALL FUN."

– **DEL HOWISON**

The groundwork was set for the first incarnation of Dark Delicacies, which in the beginning only barely qualified as a proper shop.

"We opened it up with our own collection and \$5000 because you had to pay first and last and all of that stuff," he says. "And it just went from there. We didn't have bookshelves. We didn't have anything. A friend of mine named Jay Patton, who had a bookstore called The Bent Cover in Phoenix, Arizona – we're painting or something in the store one night, getting it ready, and this van pulls up outside. Jay jumps out and

opens the back of the van. He had gotten all new bookcases for his store. He had just moved it, and he drove from Phoenix to LA, brought me his bookcases, dropped them off, got back in his car, and drove back to Phoenix. Now that's friendship."

While that makes for a captivating origin story, any horror fan with a prized collection might balk at the idea of selling it off in pursuit of a dream, and as Howison reveals, it wasn't particularly easy for his wife either.

"Sue would sell a book, and then she'd go in the back room and cry," he recalls. "And then she'd come back out and sell another book. So yeah, it bothered her. But she also saw the end goal she was going for. We never imagined this end goal where we ended up, but we saw an end goal of an ongoing business."

Thankfully, those early sacrifices weren't for naught, and what a fabulous store it became. For those who've never crossed its threshold, Dark Delicacies doesn't just sell books, DVDs, and Blu-rays, but also horror clothing and assorted spooky trinkets and gifts – all carefully curated by Sue. However, it's not just what's inside that has made the shop the internationally known horror destination that it is. It's the signings and events that the Howisons have built into the retail experience since the beginning.

"[From] our very first month," confirms How-

ison, “because we had already been to book signings at [LA sci-fi bookstore] Dangerous Visions, and I said I need to incorporate that. ... You have to give people a reason to return. And that is something that the signings provided.”

Throughout its venerable history, Dark Delicacies has welcomed a veritable who’s who of horror authors, directors, actors, illustrators, and other creative types to participate in its in-store signings. Howison is quick to note that the LA location was a boon in this department and one they likely could not have tapped into had they been located elsewhere in the country. Of the hundreds of events that have taken place there, some proved particularly memorable for Howison, a horror fan since sneaking down to watch midnight movies as a kid while his parents were asleep.

“Ray Harryhausen signing for me multiple times,” he recounts. “Ernest Borgnine – what a gentleman he was. He was signing his biography, and he had done a couple of horror films. One about a Mennonite-type sect; I can’t remember the name of it right now. But a friend of mine and myself had to go pick him up and bring him to the signing from his house. He lived up on Mulholland, and we went and picked him up. I looked around, and I said, ‘This is *McHale’s Navy* money, isn’t it?’ And he said, ‘Yes. It is. That’s what bought me my house.’ And when we brought him back home after the signing, he said, ‘Hey. You wanna look around? Come on in.’ He invited us into his house and showed us around, and he took photos with my friend and myself. Just a real delight. I have a photo of composer Christopher Young – the one who did *Hellraiser* – chasing another person around with a crutch in the store. I mean, there were nonsensical times, so it was fun. It was all fun.”

Of course, there were trickier events too. Howison points to the meteoric rise of self-published authors as being one of the more challenging situations. Originally, the store was reluctant to jump on-board, mostly because organizing signings takes a great deal of work and expense, and if the writer isn’t promoting their appearance, turn-out can be disappointing. That said, you don’t operate a business for three decades without picking up some keen problem-solving skills, so in the end the issue of the influx of indies was solved with a clever compromise: multi-author signings.

“Sue decided that once or [twice] a year, we would have a self-published signing day,” says Howison. “Then we would have, like, six or seven people who had their book. And this was the early days of self-publishing, so you weren’t getting any real Amazon support or anything else. She would put them all in one group because



Ghoulish Guests: Some of the horror royalty to have visited Dark Delicacies over the years include John Landis and Rick Baker (top), and actor Robert Loggia, pictured with Dark Del Howison.

we found out that even with the big names, if we could have two or three people signing, that cross-pollination really helped. ... So we would have a self-published signing day about every six months, just to give them a shot and to try and support the horror genre in general.”

That love and support of the genre was returned in spades when, in 2019, the Howisons’ landlord suddenly jacked up the store’s rent. In business for 25 years at that point, a choice had to be made: keep Dark Delicacies alive at a new location or call it quits. Though they initially didn’t feel comfortable asking for money online, the couple’s friends kept telling them that “Everybody does it. Just go ahead and do it because you gotta do it,” and eventually they were convinced to give crowd-funding a shot.

“The GoFundMe had been up one day when Guillermo del Toro saw it,” recalls Howison. “He posted on Twitter and said, ‘Hey, Dark Delicacies is having a GoFundMe because they need to move. We can’t let our favourite store die.’ And in 24 hours, I had \$35,000 in the GoFundMe just from him making a mention. There were a

lot of people in the industry that kicked in; most of them kicked in anonymously, so I’m not going to say their names. But just that one mention by Guillermo shows you the power of social media.”

The Howisons used the money raised to renovate the new location and complete the move, and the store thrived for five more years.

If you’ve never visited Dark Delicacies, there’s still time, but not much; its doors close for good at the end of March. Several events have been planned to wind things down, including Howison signing his upcoming collection *What Fresh Hell is This?* with Clive Barker (who wrote the book’s foreword) and a proper farewell party. (Visit darkdel.com for dates and times.)

While saying goodbye is undoubtedly bitter-sweet, Howison doesn’t harbour any regrets, and when asked about the most rewarding part of running Dark Delicacies all these years, he doesn’t mince words. It’s all about doing what you love.

“When we opened the store, Sue’s dad said to her, ‘Oh, you’re making a bad move. You should stay with Nestle.’ And she didn’t. Thank goodness she didn’t. The joy of doing something my entire life is probably the biggest treasure of all of this, and it also gave me the opportunity to be a writer, of novels and short stories and stuff, and to be an actor, that I never would have got if I was working for Target or something.” 🤪



DARK DEL HOWISON MIGHT BE CLOSING SHOP, BUT HIS FICTION WILL CONTINUE TO THRIVE LATE INTO THE NIGHT

Dark Horror

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

Dark Delicacies isn't Del Howison's only claim to fame. He's also an accomplished writer, which he credits in part to the connections he's made through the store.

"[Owning the store] absolutely helped," he says. "I think the keyword would be 'opportunity,' because being located in Burbank, 90 percent of my customers are in the entertainment industry."

Howison's upcoming collection, *What Fresh Hell Is This?* (out this March from Crystal Lake), is far from his first foray into publishing: he's written books about werewolves and vampires, and his short stories have appeared in anthologies including *Strange Bedfellows* (2004), *Midnight Premiere* (2007), *Slices of Flesh* (2012), and *18 Wheels of Horror* (2015). Given all this, a retrospective collection of his short fiction feels almost overdue.

Not just a writer, Howison's also done some time in the editorial seat, beginning with three *Dark Delicacies* anthologies, released from 2005 to 2009.

"I happened to sell a story, my first fiction sale, to editor Jeff Gelb," Howison notes. "He was doing a series of books called *Hot Blood* and they were erotic horror stories. So, I wrote one, and I sent it to him, and he bought it."

A signing for that book at the store brought opportunity knocking once again, as the pair bandied around the idea of collaborating on the *DD* anthologies, with Howison herding the talent and Gelb on assembly. Those books led to co-editing credits on *The Book of Lists: Horror* (2008) and *Midian Unmade* (2015). It's something, he says, that he would consider doing again. As for what comes after *Fresh Hell*, Howison hasn't thought that far ahead, aside from hoping for more writing time.

"I think the closing of Dark Delicacies is a big enough event for me to plan for without trying to work anything else," he says. "Once we get our feet back on the ground, then we can look for direction and see what we're gonna do." 🖤



**"ALL FOLK HORROR IS UNIFIED BY A CENTRAL THEME:
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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY DRAZEN KOZJAN



R.I.P. 2024

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

As 2024 gives way to its sequel, it's time to look back on another year of fright fare. From festival faintings to streaming and screaming, last year offered up a slate of material that not only kept us up at night, it pushed the genre forward with offerings both provocative and challenging, from creators new and returning. So join us in raising a glass to another year of horror and congratulate the standouts... to our winners and everyone else working hard in the genre, we salute you!

BEST FEATURE FILM
THE SUBSTANCE
Coralie Fargeat

BEST FIRST FEATURE
IN A VIOLENT NATURE
Chris Nash

BEST TV
EVIL (S4)
Michelle and Robert King

MOST BINGEWORTHY
UZUMAKI
Hiroshi Nagahama
and Yûji Moriyama
Adult Swim

BEST INDIE FEATURE
I SAW THE TV GLOW
Jane Schoenbrun
A24

GORIEST FILM
TERRIFIER 3
Damien Leone
Cineverse Entertainment

BEST REMAKE/REBOOT
THE FIRST OMEN
Arkasha Stevenson
20th Century Studios

**STANDOUT
PERFORMANCE – FILM**
NAOMI SCOTT
Smile 2

**STANDOUT
PERFORMANCE – TV**
HAROLD PERRINEAU
From (s3)

BEST SHORT FILM
HELL IS A TEENAGE GIRL
Stephen Sawchuk

**MOST ORIGINAL
CONCEPT**
THE DEVIL'S BATH
Severin Fiala and Veronika Franz
Shudder



BEST ANTHOLOGY FILM/TV

V/H/S BEYOND

Jay Cheel, Jordan Downey
and Christian Long
WTFilms

BEST SCORE

MAXXXINE

Tyler Bates

BEST SPECIAL EFFECTS

THE SUBSTANCE

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

SALEM'S LOT

BEST BLU-RAY/DVD

PACKAGING

THE HITCHER

Second Sight

MOST WELCOME REISSUE

MUTE WITNESS

Arrow Video

BEST ALBUM

LUCIFER V

Lucifer
Nuclear Blast

BEST MUSIC REISSUE

BILLION DOLLAR BABIES

**("TRILLION DOLLAR"
DELUXE EDITION)**

Alice Cooper
Rhino Records

BEST SPECIAL EDITION VINYL

LONGLEGS OST

MAGGOT-FILLED 7-INCH

Made by Mutant

BEST ALBUM ART

ZOMBI OST

Greg Ruth
Made by Mutant

BEST AAA VIDEO GAME

SILENT HILL 2 REMAKE

Bloober Team

BEST INDIE GAME

PACIFIC DRIVE

Ironwood Studios/
Kepler Interactive

BEST ONGOING COMIC BOOK SERIES

CONAN THE BARBARIAN

Jim Zub, José Villarrubia
and Robert De La Torre
Titan Comics

BEST LIMITED COMIC BOOK

SERIES/GRAPHIC NOVEL

**THE STRANGE TALES OF
OSCAR ZAHN**

Tri Vuong
Ten Speed Graphic

BEST FICTION BOOK

THE QUEEN

Nick Cutter
Gallery Books

BEST NON-FICTION BOOK

**THE SATANIC SCREEN:
AN ILLUSTRATED
GUIDE TO THE
DEVIL IN CINEMA**

Nikolas Schreck
Headpress

BEST ANTHOLOGY BOOK

**THE DAGON
COLLECTION**

Nate Pedersen, ed
PS Publishing

BEST SINGLE-AUTHOR COLLECTION

NOT A SPECK OF LIGHT

Laird Barron
Bad Hand Books

BEST ART BOOK

A DOORWAY TO JOE:

**THE ART OF JOE
COLEMAN**

Joe Coleman
Fantagraphics Books

BEST TREND

SOLID SEQUELS!

WORST TREND

**INFLATABLE
HALLOWEEN
DECORATIONS**

MOST WELCOME COMEBACK

ROBERT EGGERS

MOST ANTICIPATED IN 2025

28 YEARS LATER

LEAST ANTICIPATED IN 2025

**THE CONJURING:
LAST RITES**

CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES

FATAL ATTRACT/SHUN

THE DEAD THING

Starring Blu Hunt, Ben Smith-Petersen and John Karna
Directed by Elric Kane
Written by Elric Kane and Webb Wilcoxen
Shudder

Don't be fooled by the Valentine's Day debut Shudder is giving *The Dead Thing*. This accomplished feature by director and noted cinema podcaster Elric Kane dives deep into the darkest and unhappiest sides of romance; among other things, it's perhaps the ultimate cautionary tale about using dating apps.

Kane and Webb Wilcoxen's screenplay begins with young singleton Alex (Blu Hunt) stuck in a revolving door of unsatisfying hookups she finds via the Friktion app. Then, a small miracle occurs: she meets Kyle (Ben Smith-Petersen), a handsome, compassionate, interesting man with whom she spends a wonderfully satisfying night. But after that, he disappears; Alex's messages go unanswered, and her attempts to track him down are initially fruitless. When her persistence ultimately pays off, it leads to some



surprising and discomfiting revelations about Kyle, and *The Dead Thing* becoming a creepily gripping study of obsession and unhealthy relationships.

Though it might seem evident what's in store based on the movie's title, the state of Kyle's character isn't that simple. Kane, Wilcoxen, and Smith-Petersen give him a characterization that both lends him a tragic dimension and leads him

to take unsettling turns in the latter half. Even as *The Dead Thing* ventures into more explicitly horrific territory, it remains rooted in its two lead characters and their interactions, which are disturbing and frankly erotic, and sometimes both at the same time. Hunt is terrific navigating the many emotional beats Alex goes through, and cinematographer Ioana Vasile complements her intense psychological journey with striking, moody visuals. The supernatural may come out to play during *The Dead Thing*, but what makes the movie so strong is how relatable it is to what often goes on between people in the real world.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

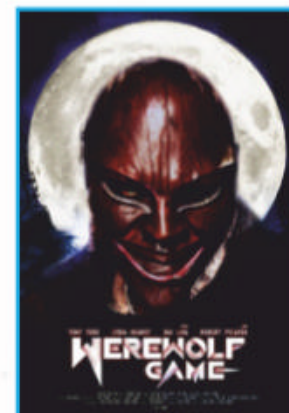
NOTHING TO HOWL ABOUT

WEREWOLF GAME

Starring Tony Todd, Lydia Hearst and Teala Dunn
Directed by Jackie Payne and Cara Claymore
Written by Jackie Payne
The Horror Collective

Talk about a bait and switch: at first glance, *Werewolf Game* seems like it could be a *The Beast Must Die* for the post-Saw era, but it proves to be a talky attempt to translate the popular party game into a survival thriller. That's less a spoiler than a consumer advisory to note that nary a real lycanthrope shows its face throughout the running time!

The late Tony Todd (also an executive producer), playing for the back row as if he knew this would be one of his last roles, stars as The Judge, the masked overseer of a *Werewolf Game* with life-or-death stakes. Twelve strangers have been kidnapped and brought to an island where they're informed that they are "villagers," that three among them are "werewolves" who will be hunting them during designated hours, and that each day they must vote for one of their number to die. Their at-



tackers, signalled by what at first appears to be *Wolfen*-esque lupine vision but quickly becomes *Terminator*-style robo-vision, aren't furry shape-shifters but people wearing snouty masks and metal claws. The supporting cast includes Bai Ling and, for a bit of lycanthropicture cred, *The Howling*'s Robert Picardo, but none of them are given characters that are interesting or developed enough to elicit any true rooting interest.

Instead of tightening the screws as the group attempts to suss out the "werewolves" and preserve their lives, the movie descends into low-energy dialogue exchanges, inexplicable story and character turns, and a score that practically implores, "Oh, the humanity!" Scenes of horror and mayhem are minimal for a great deal of the runtime, and there are no impact shots in the violent moments that do occur, which no doubt saved money on makeup effects but doesn't help *Werewolf Game* appeal to its target audience.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

DREAMS & SHADOWS

THE DAMNED

Starring Odessa Young, Joe Cole and Siobhan Finneran
Directed by Thordur Palsson
Written by Thordur Palsson and Jamie Hannigan
Vertical

Guilt is the source of horror in *The Damned*, a handsomely shot horror-mystery that is so close to being amazing. Set in 1870s Iceland, it stars Australian actress Odessa Young (*The Stand*) as Eva, a young widow in charge of a remote fishing station and its all-male crew. When their desolate, hardscrabble existence is disrupted by a schooner sinking offshore, Eva decides not

to help, worried that caring for the survivors will exhaust their own meagre supplies. It is an understandable course of action, but the morality of her decision-making becomes that much greyer when she agrees to pilage the schooner's much-needed stores, which have been

floating ashore temptingly. Further, when some of the schooner's stranded crew threaten to capsize the fishermen's boat, Eva's crew is forced to finish them off. Now with blood on their hands, the survivors are seemingly haunted by a *draugr* – an undead creature from Icelandic folklore – in their dreams as well as in reality. Sinking steadily under the weight of their guilt, the crew begins to die one by one, both at their own and each other's hands.

The Damned is a mostly successful exercise



Nosferatu

in tension, as it becomes clear that the outpost's denizens will have to answer for both their actions and inaction, regardless of their intentions. It is also damned (sorry!) good-looking, with Icelandic filmmaker Thordur Palsson (TV's *The Valhalla Murders*) ably abetted by cinematographer Eli Arenson (*Lamb*), whose compositions look like paintings – albeit stark, snow-covered ones. The cast, headed by Young and English actor Joe Cole (*Green Room*) as Eva's right-hand man Daniel, is strong and the romantic tension between the leads is palpable. The film's only – but near fatal – misstep is a denouement that makes it unclear whether the threat was supernatural. Despite this, *The Damned* may leave you muttering "Damn!"

SEAN PLUMMER

A FAMILIAR FIEND

NOSFERATU

Starring Bill Skarsgård, Lily-Rose Depp and Nicholas Hoult
Written and directed by Robert Eggers
Focus Features

A new take on F.W. Murnau's landmark silent vampire thriller has been Robert Eggers' passion project since before he first grabbed everyone's attention with *The Witch*. And that passion is all over his *Nosferatu*, a ravishingly well-mounted and very well-acted retelling that elaborates on – yet hews to the basics of – its source material... and that film's source material as well.

In other words, Eggers' *Nosferatu* takes credited inspiration from both the 1922 version and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* novel. It begins in the fictitious German town of Wisborg in 1838: estate agent Thomas Hutter (Nicholas Hoult), anxious to make a good impression on his employer, embarks on a six-week trip to Transylvania to meet prospective, mysterious client Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård). Needless to say, that encounter doesn't go well for Thomas; meanwhile, his wife Ellen (Lily-Rose Depp) is haunted by visions of an ancient vampire who seems to have resurrect-

ed for the purpose of claiming her. Orlok comes to Wisborg, bringing a horrific plague with him and drawing Ellen further under his spell, and it falls to Professor Albin Eberhart von Franz (Willem Dafoe) to lead the charge to free her and the town from Orlok's evil influence.

Nosferatu 2024 isn't a revisionist take on the material – while you watch it, there isn't a sense of discovering new sides of the story – but the senses of sight and sound are certainly fulfilled. Eggers has marshalled a top-notch creative team to im-

merse the audience in the decaying Transylvania, the bustling Wisborg, and the corrupted place the latter becomes following Orlok's arrival. There are marvelously creepy and atmospheric moments throughout, and the cast is sterling, led by Skarsgård and Depp enacting a dance toward death. Wearing Orlok's reconceived, and excellent, prosthetics by David White, Skarsgård joins the pantheon of great vampiric performances. You'll likely come away from *Nosferatu* feeling you've seen this tale before, but never this well.

KEN MICHAELS



DROPPED THE KNIFE

LAST STRAW

Starring Jessica Belkin, Taylor Kowalski and Joji Otani-Hansen
Directed by Alan Scott Neal
Written by Taylor Sardoni
Shout! Studios

Ever seen a film that was about 87% great? What am I saying? Of course you have, you're a horror fan. Kudos are due then to director Alan Scott Neal for earning such a high score with his first film, *Last Straw*. But, unlike high school, that percentage doesn't quite translate into a





OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE BATTLES THE KILLER ROBOTS!

AYE ROBOT



MONSTERS OF MAN

11:11 Entertainment

Have you heard? The robots are coming and they're going to kill us all! Don't believe me? Just take a gander at social media: computer systems utilizing artificial intelligence are going to be the downfall of humankind. To prepare you, I've assembled a trio of tech-noir films to help in the fight against the sentient toasters that are soon coming for us all. First up is the lofty-sounding *Monsters of Man*, wherein a group of highly classified military robots are dropped deep into the Cambodian jungle to take out a drug lab. Due to some faulty programming, however, the armed androids wind up targeting a team of doctors and some helpless villagers. Featuring elements from *Terminator*, *Chappie*, and *Predator*, this surprisingly effective tale doesn't skimp on exotic locations or eye-popping FX; these robots are not only real – they're really scary! Let's hope we get to Mars before these guys go online.

BODY COUNT: 22

BEST DEFENSE AGAINST THE ROBOTS: An electro-magnetic pulse

DOES LANCE DREAM OF ELECTRIC ETC.?



MURDERBOT

Full Moon Features

I admit that back in the days of my misspent youth, I may have fantasized that our robot overlords would be busty, raven-haired centerfolds who would seduce me prior to dispatching me with a smile on my face! I also may have imagined that the scientists working on said tease-bots would be short-sighted blondes who wore white lab coats over their pink crop tops. So, imagine my surprise when I came across *Murderbot*, a movie directed by Jim Wynorski (*Chopping Mall*, *Dinocroc vs. Supergator*) and featuring former *Playboy* model Rocky DeMarco (*Cheerleader Massacre*, *Camel Spiders*) as a cyborg bent on human destruction, armed with laser eyes, bountiful breasts, and skimpy spandex. Dreams do come true! Boasting a runtime of barely 44 minutes, this Full Moon "feature" delivers on busty scientists and a bird-brained plot that had me yelling for Jim Wynorski to get out of my mind!

BODY COUNT: 8

BEST DEFENSE AGAINST THE ROBOTS: Shitty trumpet playing

I SPIT ON YOUR HARD DRIVE



ROBOWOMAN

Wildeye Releasing

When I read that the star of this movie, Dawna Lee Heising, had acted in over 250 feature films and won 780 film festival awards – including a whopping 460 Best Actress awards – I wondered how the hell I had never heard of her before. Then I looked up her film credits and found them littered with titles like *Amityville Clownhouse* and *Meathook Massacre 4*. How did I not know about her!? How had I not seen her movies!? I therefore made it top priority to feast my eyes on *RoboWoman*, a film where Heising's character is brutally attacked during a botched rape, only to be pieced back together with cyberparts so she can take revenge on her attackers (natch). If you're reading this column, you'll know I've watched some bad films, but *RoboWoman* is so mind-numbingly, eye-searingly craptastic that I am convinced some higher force kept me from her films all these years. A Pentium 500 rigged up to a tape deck could make a better movie; don't let my suffering be in vain – steer clear of this bag of bolts!

BODY COUNT: 8

BEST DEFENSE AGAINST THE ROBOTS: Turning the movie off

LAST CHANCE LANCE

passing grade, as his (mostly) clever and engaging slasher drops the proverbial knife in its final act.

Jessica Belkin (*American Horror Story*) stars as Nancy, a recent high school grad not feeling all that jazzed about being stuck managing her dad's highway café. After a group of masked teens menace her at work, her desire to feel in control of some part of her life leads Nancy to fire senior employee Jake (Taylor Kowalski: *MaXXXine*) when he gets a bit mouthy. With Jake fired, Nancy has to work the late shift alone and, not surprisingly, those masked teens return.

And then there's a twist (which I won't reveal here) that elevates *Last Straw* beyond its stylish set-up as a *The Strangers*-style home invasion thriller. Indeed, Neal and his team do a great job bringing Nancy's dog-eared, small-town existence to life, from the grime on the café's cash register keys to her desperation as she bitches to her bestie about feeling stuck. The casting is equally impeccable, with Belkin making the initially unlikeable Nancy loveable and Kowalski exuding a laid-back menace, even as we realize that Jake is just as desperate as she is.

Unfortunately, a few unbelievable choices (like one character not owning a cellphone and choosing revenge over calling 911 despite potentially life-threatening injuries) derail an otherwise taut thriller and ruin key emotional moments. *Last Straw* is ultimately disappointing, but we hope Neal graduates into something bigger and better with his next film.

SEAN PLUMMER

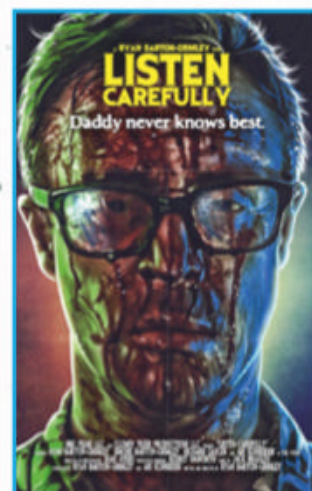
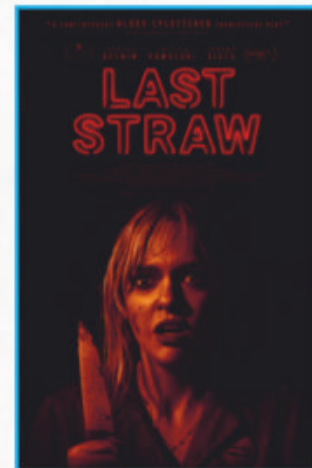
WILL KILL FOR CASH

BABY MONITOR

Starring Ryan Barton-Grimley, Simone Barton-Grimley and Ari Schneider

Written and directed by Ryan Barton-Grimley
Haida Street Films

Remember how serial killer/extortionist Scorpio (the incomparable Andy Robinson) ran Clint Eastwood all over San Francisco throughout one very long night to deliver a ransom in the original *Dirty Harry*? Yeah, you better, punk! That's kind of what happens in micro-budget thriller *Baby Monitor* (original title: *Listen Carefully*), but Andy McNeary (star/writer/director/producer/editor/effects tech, and probably donut-fetcher Ryan Barton-Grimley) ain't no Inspector Harry Callahan; he's just a nebbish, unhappily married and sleep-deprived assistant bank manager whose infant daughter has been kidnapped by baddies who keep in touch via a baby monitor, forcing Andy to drive around town to





Replicator

embezzle a hefty ransom from multiple ATMs.

Although he intermittently almost gets a step ahead of his nemeses, Andy then finds out the hard way that he hasn't, then almost does again, then... well, you know. And as routine as that rhythm gets, Barton-Grimley has a good instinct for keeping the tension cranked without getting shark-jumpy, which is always a lurking narrative threat in thrillers like this. He also avoids another common pitfall: the urge to turn his story's antagonist into an overly colourful (read: marketing-friendly) supervillain. The faceless, nameless voice barking orders over the baby monitor is memorably threatening and snarky as fuck but never quite skates over that line into self-conscious, theatrical pithiness. Neither does poor, stressed-to-breaking Andy suddenly go all James Bond in the final act, although he has a few breakthroughs that keep things interesting. Whether or not a rather unsatisfying ending derails the entirety of the previous 80 minutes is, I suppose, a matter of individual taste; the chops Barton-Grimley displays on both sides of the lens went a long way toward alleviating that problem for me, at least.

JOHN W. BOWEN

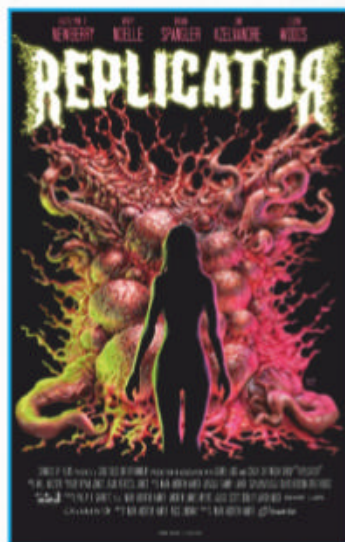
LOOKING FOR LOVECRAFT

REPLICATOR

Starring KateLynn E. Newberry, Brey Noelle and Brian Spangler

Directed by Mark Andrew Hamer

Written by Mark Andrew Hamer and Russ Lindway
Cranked Up Films



It's a man's world, and it's also often a cruel one. In *Replicator*, lawyer Darby Vincent (Brey Noelle) experiences these realities daily. At work, she sees it when abusive men walk free and she sees it at home when her negligent father persists in a life of selfishness, even in the face of a cancer diagnosis. Her only solace is her goth-coded best friend, bar owner Neila (KateLynn E. Newberry), but things take a turn for the complicated when Dad dies in a sudden and bizarre fashion. As the local authorities look into the cause of death, we discover that something may be changing the nature of the entire world's sense of morality... and at an Eldritch price.

Lovecraft and body horror have always gone together like peanut butter and chocolate – the unknown as a cause of fear or a beacon of liberation and the distortion of the human form as a visual expression of perverted societal forces. In *Replicator*, Darby's life and Neila's past inform the horrors that follow. Director Mark Andrew Hamer attempts to connect strife and abuse with the vicious retribution of forces beyond our realm. In doing so, we get some glimpses of appropriately drippy practical effects and a cast that is game for the horrors that are being unleashed. However, the performances aren't quite strong enough to coalesce the themes being presented, and budgetary constraints lead to some dodgy CGI that clashes with the more creative and

competent practical work. There's the seed of something otherworldly here, it just needs further nourishment by the right hands... or tentacles.

DR. BENNY GRAVES

HEX MEX

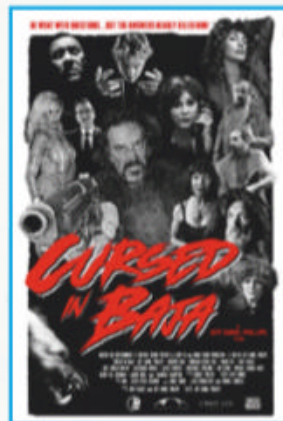
CURSED IN BAJA

Starring Jeff Daniel Phillips, Finnegan Seeker Bell and Barbara Crampton

Written and directed by Jeff Daniel Phillips
Anchor Bay

Anchor Bay is a name I associate fondly with *Rue Morgue's* earliest years: a home video outfit that cleaned up and reissued more beloved horror and cult film titles than we could list on a single page. For the uninitiated, let's drop a few titles like *Dawn of the Dead*, *Halloween*, *The Evil Dead*, *Phantasm* and *Suspiria* – I'm sure you get the picture. Scuttled in the 2016 Lionsgate/Starz merger, Anchor Bay was recently reanimated by Umbrelc Entertainment; the admirably ambitious but hopelessly problematic *Cursed in Baja* is among its first slate of releases.

Cursed is written and directed by Jeff Daniel Phillips, who also stars, with an acting resume one might call varied: he played the original caveman in Geico Insurance commercials, had recurring roles in the TV series *Westworld* and *The Gifted* and appeared in Rob Zombie's *3 From Hell* and *The Munsters* (playing Herman in the latter). In this micro-budget horror/neo-noir mashup (his second directorial feature), Phillips plays Pirelli, a dam-



SHORT CUTS

BITE-SIZED FRIGHTS
FOR SMALL APPETITES

ON THE SLAB: TICKLING YOUR FUNNY BONE

HORRORSCOPE

4:31 mins/YouTube via Cosmic Films Channel

A young schoolgirl (Claudia Trujillo) suffering from intense nightmares senses she is being stalked by an evil presence everywhere she goes. Desperate for answers, her mother (Miriam Marcet) seeks help from a doctor (Morgan Symes) to explain the malevolent phenomenon surrounding their family. Thus begins Spanish director Pol Diggler's amusing deconstruction of classic horror trailers, as our stoic physician reaches not for a Bible, but a leather-bound tome of horror movie stereotypes and proffers his credentials as a moonlighting internet film critic. Aside from the multiple chuckles that *Horrorscope* provides, this short from 2019 remains relevant because, let's face it – we can all identify an A24 trailer way before its logo appears!



MURDER CAMP

15:02 mins/YouTube via Alter Channel

Our story begins with a familiar scenario, as camp counsellors Becky (Olivia Holguín) and Johnny (Ian S. Peterson) steal away to a cabin to make out, unaware that a shape named Kevin (Will Harris), a.k.a. the legendary Butcher of Black Mountain, lurks just outside. However, before he can begin the slaughter, he catches sight of his serial killer buddy Greg (Jeremy Radin) with whom he shares the killing grounds. The two have an oddly existential conversation before a third party appears, one who may change their destinies forever. Directed by Clara Aranovich, 2023's *Murder Camp* is sharp and clever, balancing the tightrope between parody and character study. The two leads, who also co-wrote the film, showcase terrific comic timing and clear insight into slasher tropes.

MEAT CLEAVER

15:15 mins/YouTube via Crypt TV

A sweetheart preschool teacher named Wendy (Jessica Ruth Bell) finds herself sitting across a desk from a stranger (Socorro Jones) in an impossibly white room. However, before this mysterious woman can get started on the mysterious paperwork, she has to address the elephant in the room – that Wendy has a meat cleaver lodged in her head! So begins the purgatory high jinks of Jared Asher Harris' aptly named *Meat Cleaver*. After making a name for himself in the realm of music videos, Harris took the leap to short film by utilizing his love of cinematic icons such as Tim Burton and Mel Brooks. In addition to the clever and witty writing, this piece also pops visually as the film is split between two halves: a Wes Anderson-esque Heaven and a grindhouse-soaked Hell. Be sure to stick around through the credits to hear a silly, catchy tune about our fair Wendy.

JAY CLARKE

aged ex-cop and now parolee who reluctantly accepts a skeezy rich family's assignment to track down their missing grandson, an aspiring musician who's now mixed up with gangsters and a cult of chupacabra worshippers in Tijuana.

Ya gotta applaud the ambition that fuelled this thing but it never quite gels and is ultimately doomed by an increasingly sloppy final act. Additionally problematic is a dodgy sound mix that sometimes wreaks havoc with the dialogue. It's particularly unfortunate since Phillips and many of the cast turn in decent performances, but they're saddled with a haphazard and occasionally laughable script. Also, our beloved Barbara Crampton's name appears in bold print in the promo but she's barely onscreen for a minute in the first reel.

JOHN W. BOWEN

HELL ON HOLIDAY

YOU ARE NOT ME

Starring Roser Tapias, Yapoena Silva and Anna Kurikka

Written and directed by Marisa Crespo and Moisés Romera

Doppelganger Releasing

Fortunate and rare is the family that makes it through the holidays unscathed, which is exactly why the season makes such a fertile ground for horror cinema. Evil sentient cookies, psychotic Santas, crazed crank-callers: there is no end to outré Yuletide terrors, but *You Are Not Me* proves that sometimes a mere family reunion can be the most deadly.

After a three-year absence, Aitana (Roser Tapias) arrives early at her parents' house for Christmas with her wife Gabi (Yapoena Silva) and their adopted infant son. While her disabled brother Saúl is happy to see her, Aitana's parents give her the cold shoulder, though there seems to be a bigger reason for it than their surprise arrival. There's a new woman in the house, Nadia (Anna Kurikka), who acts as the family housekeeper and Saúl's caretaker, and who seems to be a replacement for Aitana. She has taken over her room, is in all the family photos, and even wears the wedding dress that Aitana "didn't want and didn't need." While her parents explain all of it away, an unconvinced Aitana is determined to find out the truth of Nadia's identity.

In their first feature-length horror film, filmmaking duo Marisa Crespo and Moisés Romera let the mystery cook in a nice slow burn, dropping clues that might explain why this house and everyone in it is acting so strangely. A holiday dinner with the family's weird, old friends and their "homemade herbal liqueur," a "crisis" from Aitana's past that she's kept hidden from her wife, Aitana's paranoia that she's being replaced by someone her parents would prefer to have as a daughter... as we keep guessing, the tension keeps building until we get to an end that's as heavy as it is horrifying. With its uncanny vibes and uncomfortable family dynamics that perhaps mask greater evils, *You Are Not Me* is the seasonal successor to *Get Out* and *The Invitation* that'll give you a new mantra for your own family gatherings: "Hey, it could be worse."

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PRESENCE KICKS OFF 2025 WITH A DOMESTIC THRILL RIDE

A GHOST IN THE HOUSE

By Michael Gingold

Given the variety of cinematic genres Steven Soderbergh has explored in the three and a half decades since his groundbreaking debut with *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, it's surprising he has never made a straight-up horror film before his new ghost-POV opus *Presence*. Nevertheless, he did edge in that direction with 1991's *Kafka* – and reveals that he once came close to redoing a classic screen spooker with eventual *Presence* scripter David Koepp.

"David and I have known each other for over 35 years," Soderbergh says – ever since *Apartment Zero* (which Koepp co-scripted) and *Sex, Lies* both debuted at the 1989 U.S. Film Festival (later to be rechristened the Sundance Film Festival). "In the mid-to-late '90s, we wanted to do a remake of Universal's ghost story *The Uninvited*. We worked on it for a while, and had some really cool stuff figured out, but I was bumping up against the third-act explanation for why these things were happening. David was patiently trying to explain that you have to have that scene, and I said, 'I don't want to shoot that; I think it's really clunky.' So, we just stepped away from that project."

The two eventually reconnected on the 2022 techno-thriller *Kimi*, which led to them venturing back into paranormal territory with *Presence*. The story was inspired by an experience a housesitter had with an apparent spectre in Soderbergh's LA home, where a woman had died under questionable circumstances years before.

"I guess I could have said, 'Based on a true story,'" the director says with a laugh. "That got me thinking about how this deceased woman might feel about having people in her house. I worked up about eight pages of script that basically established the premise of how the story would be told. I sent those pages to David, and asked, 'Does this spark anything with you?' and he said, 'Yeah, I know what to do with this.'"

From Soderbergh's basic notes, Koepp came up with the storyline of career woman Rebecca (Lucy Liu), her husband Chris (Chris Sullivan), and teenage kids Chloe (Callina Liang) and Tyler (Eddy Maday) moving into a

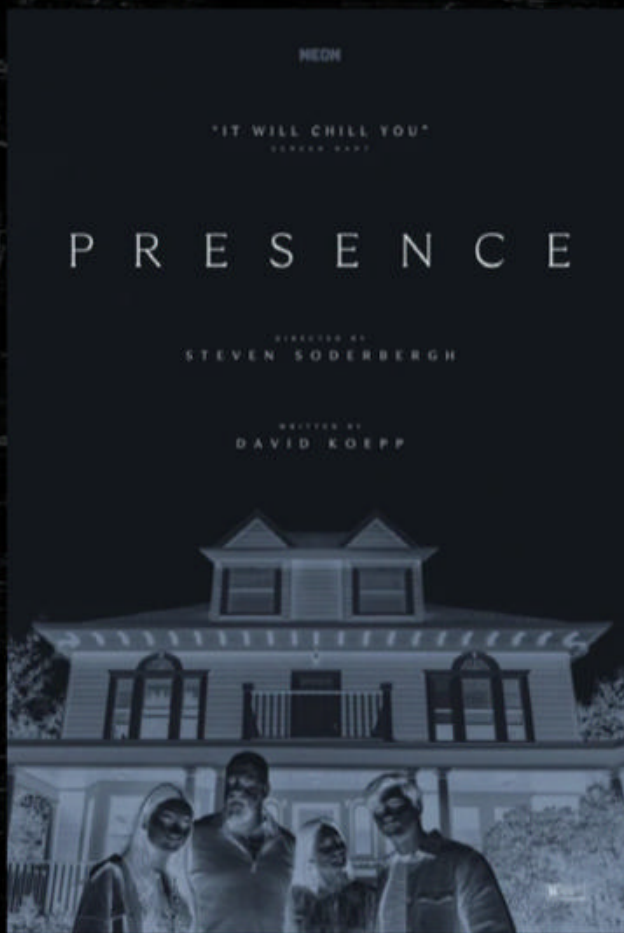
suburban home where a restless ghost dwells. The opening minutes, set in the empty house prior to their arrival, establish that we'll be seeing the entire film through the invisible spirit's eyes. Once the family has settled in, the camera/phantom observes and follows them – and Chloe, who has

recently been touched by tragedy, is the first to sense that they're not alone. The result allows us to witness the traditional tropes of a haunting film – a visit by a medium, the gradual revelation of the ghost's backstory and purpose – from a fresh perspective, literally. Serving, as he almost always does, as his own cinematographer under the pseudonym "Peter Andrews," Soderbergh was also *Presence*'s camera operator, wielding the lightweight Sony a7 camera for the long takes.

"I would block the scene with the actors first, and then I would start thinking about how the presence would interact with them," he explains. "At times, it was a real dance; I was moving with them and around them, and was very close to them, so it was quite intimate. But I think if you were to ask the cast, knowing that each scene was one long shot was very satisfying. Because they'd get to play the whole thing, and if we got it, they didn't have to go back and recreate whatever energy they'd come up with in order to get additional coverage. The scary thing about it for me was, there was no plan B. If it didn't work, we were in real trouble."

Shooting in this manner also required Soderbergh to rethink the traditional dynamics of cinematography.

"The impulse, as a camera operator, is to anticipate where a character is going to go," he explains, "[but] that was something I had to completely get rid of, because the presence doesn't know how people are going to move. So I had to train myself to build a little bit of lag time into my reactions to things, and sometimes there wouldn't be enough of a lag, or there would be too much, and we would have to start over again. I'd become worried that I was going to make a mistake... and sometimes I did, and I'd have to say, 'Cut! Sorry, that was my fault!'" 🧛



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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD



HAMMER'S NEW *CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER* WILL SLAY YOU

With the revitalization of Hammer Films under new owner John Gore, the venerable British horror studio has not only begun plunging into new productions, but is giving its classics new life on 4K disc. The first to receive this upgrade is *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*, releasing January 27 in a massive Limited Collector's Edition boxed set containing two UHDs and three Blu-rays, plus an insane amount of bonus features.

First released in 1974, *Captain Kronos* was the directorial debut of Brian Clemens, who had previously scripted and produced Hammer's *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* and made an indelible mark on the UK TV scene with series such as *The Avengers*, *The Professionals*, and many others. Clemens shook up the studio's bloodsucker formula by combining it with the swashbuckling genre, introducing the titular character played by Horst Janson. A former soldier turned slayer, Captain Kronos is summoned by an old doctor friend to investigate murders by a vampire that drains its victims of their youth, rather than their blood. Hammer glamour girl Caroline Munro co-stars as Carla, a Romani woman who joins Kronos and his hunchbacked assistant Grost (John Cater) in their attempts to uncover and dispatch the malefactor.

"*Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* was chosen as our first 4K release to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its theatrical showing and because of its enduring cult appeal," says Hammer's chief creative officer Jamie Anderson. "Unlike

the Gothic horror staples Hammer is known for, *Captain Kronos* is a genre hybrid, combining elements of vampire lore with action and adventure in a way that was ahead of its time. Brian Clemens brought a fresh approach to storytelling with this film, and it has influenced everything that followed – from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Twilight* to *From Dusk Till Dawn* – whether they know it or not."

"For a movie that's 50 years old, *Captain Kronos* seems like it was made yesterday," adds author, screenwriter, and horror historian Bruce G. Hallenbeck, who contributed to the special features. "It's fast-paced, with a terrific musical score by Laurie Johnson, and has a certain quality about it that prevents it from seeming dated. The fact that most of the film was shot on location in broad daylight is a neat touch that truly turns the vampire myth on its head. Ian Wilson's lush cinematography conjures up the feeling of an 'English Western,' giving it the sweeping, almost pagan feel that made *Witchfinder General* so memorable."

Hammer's boxed set contains three separate versions of *Captain Kronos* – though as Anderson notes, the differences have to do with presentation, not content.

"Interestingly, *Captain Kronos* appears to be one of the few Hammer productions where the same edit of the film was used globally," he explains. "The variations are in aspect ratio, each offering a distinct viewing experience. The



1.37:1 version showcases the full image as it was originally filmed, providing a unique opportunity to see the film's complete visual composition. The 1.66:1 ratio is the widescreen format in which the film was shown in UK cinemas, preserving its intended theatrical presentation for British audiences. The 1.85:1 version reflects the widescreen format used in U.S. cinemas, complete with the period-accurate Paramount logo at the head, adding a touch of authenticity for American viewers.

"The restoration process was meticulous, and based on significant research," Anderson continues. "The best available materials – in this case the original negative – were tracked down for scanning and restoration. The film was then

further graded for HDR, an essential step in presenting the film in 4K UHD. As the original audio elements – dialogue, music, and effects – still existed, we were able to create not only a 5.1 soundtrack from these materials, but also a Dolby Atmos mix. Of course, original mono is also available as an option. It was important to us that the final result not only present the movie in its very best light, but exceed fan expectations.”

Kronos devotees will also likely be more than satisfied with the extras package Hammer has put together. In addition to four archival commentaries by Clemens, Munro, Wilson, as well as Hallenbeck, and numerous past interviews, there is a new commentary, a pair of introductions, and an hour-long documentary featuring the late Clemens’ family and Munro.

“It was a privilege to collaborate with them,” Anderson says. “The Clemens family provided invaluable insights into Brian’s creative process and his vision for *Captain Kronos*. Caroline, as always, was an absolute delight, bringing energy and warmth to the project, sharing behind-the-scenes stories and reflecting on her time working on the film. Their contributions add a deeply personal touch to the extras and give fans a real sense of the film’s history. Fans will also discover details about the challenges of creating a genre-defying film and the legacy it has left behind. Additionally, we’ve included rarely seen production photos and promotional materials, which provide a fascinating glimpse into how the film was marketed and received at the time.”

And if that’s not enough, the leather-feel slipcase with red foil titling and inner box featuring new artwork by fan-favourite illustrator Graham Humphreys contain a wealth of printed material. This includes a double-sided poster reproduction, art cards, a 100-page reprint of the *Captain Kronos* comics adaptation from Britain’s *The House of Hammer* magazine, and a 136-page book stocked with writings old and new (among them an essay by Hallenbeck) about the movie.

“Every detail of the printed extras was carefully considered to create a collector’s item worthy of *Captain Kronos*,” Anderson says. “We collaborated with the Clemens family, experts, collectors, historians, and fans to ensure the materials would both inform and delight. It was a true la-



Captain Kronos

bour of love, designed to immerse audiences in the world of the film.”

With *Captain Kronos* staking out Hammer’s new place in the 4K disc marketplace, there are of course many more titles to come, “each chosen for its cultural significance or rarity,” says Anderson. However, while Hammer is rightly known globally as a byword for horror, it was and is much more than that. Over the years, it produced crime, war, science fiction, comedy, and many other films that are often ignored.

These are all movies that Hammer, in its 90th year, plans to restore and re-present to both long-time fans and a brand-new audience. And while he can’t reveal specific titles just yet, Anderson says that each film will be fully restored in 4K and made available via our new Limited Collector’s Edition series.

“Our goal is to celebrate Hammer’s legacy with the care and respect it deserves,” he says, “ensuring every release is a must-have for collectors and fans alike.”





CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT



DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

A Lot to Hate

by John W. Bowen

Why now? Why a column on one of 2024's worst films, months after its release? Well, call me a closure junkie. *'Salem's Lot* remains one of my favourite Stephen King novels and, for all the liberties Tobe Hooper's 1979 TV adaptation takes, it's a classic I continue to hold near and dear. I wrote a Classic Cut on that version in *RM#160* and a Bowen's Basement column on the hopelessly mixed bag that was the largely unseen 2004 miniseries. So, what am I gonna do, ignore the new one, no matter how wretched?

In case you missed the shitnado of rumours about this project's problematic gestation, here's what I've gleaned. First announced in 2019, the third screen version of King's beloved vampire epic was scheduled for theatrical release in September 2022, then yanked and rescheduled for April 2023. Soon, rumours flew that Warner had scrapped all theatrical plans. Talk of multiple reshoots and recuts circulated and there was speculation that Warner was getting cold feet after several recent King adaptations tanked. More months – eventually two years – passed before the scuttlebutt finally shifted to streaming services. Just about every big name was bandied about like a small town buzzing about a homecoming queen's premarital pregnancy before an official announcement late last summer that *Salem's Lot* would come available October 3 on HBO Max in the U.S. and Crave in Canada. And all with basically zero publicity beyond a trailer that screened at Beyond Fest and then dropped online a couple of weeks before the release.

Now okay, rumours are just rumours, but



anyone could reasonably conclude from all this that Warner had absolutely zero confidence in the final product and just wanted to dump the thing like a mutant bastard child among a bunch of other Halloween season releases and move the fuck on. And what of said final product? The cast is, for the most part, solid, with one outstanding misstep: Danish actor Pilou Asbæk (*Game of Thrones*) isn't just a singularly bad choice for alpha-vamp Barlow's human familiar R.T. Straker, he's a singularly *bizarre* bad choice. Straker 2024 is a dead ringer for Zach Galifianakis' character Marty "Tickleshits" Huggins from *The Campaign*, a Straker whose clipped, icily urbane English accent has been swapped for an American one with suspiciously Danish-sounding inflections.

King's dense storyline has been *Reader's Digested* into a thin gruel. Writer/director Gary Dauberman (or maybe, in his defence, some meddling producer) seems worried that we're all too thick to pick up plot points (the dwindling number that remain, that is) without having them spoon-fed to us via dialogue, newspaper headlines or signs, signs, everywhere signs. There aren't nearly as many ill-advised

plot revisions here as in the 2004 version, but at less than two hours, the compression is painful. And while I didn't keep an official count, I'm positive there can't be more than ten lines of King's original dialogue that made it into the final cut. Know what *did* make it in? Tickleshits – sorry, I mean Straker – busting through the front door of the Marsten House like some Gothic sitcom dad, bellowing, "Oh Master Barlow! Lord of Flies! It is I, Straker, your devoted servant! Let's feast!" Incidentally, Barlow himself (full-time demon dude Alexander Ward) is actually pretty cool. He skews much more toward the bestial, nonverbal monster of the 1979 version than King's original creation, but I'm okay with that, since there's one less character saddled with terrible dialogue.

Scouring my psyche for anything positive to say about this version, I guess the music score by Nathan Barr and Lisbeth Scott is pretty cool and Gordon Lightfoot's masterpiece "Sundown" is certainly an inspired choice for a recurring motif. The effects are decent and there's a fun bit involving a blood transfusion bag. The final throwdown – which has been relocated to a drive-in – has great energy and some nifty imagery, but WTF was so wrong with the source material to warrant a rewrite?

To misappropriate and mangle a famous line from another King novel, sometimes unreleased is better. Now get the hell out of my basement before I start pounding stakes into anything that moves. 🦇



featuring

Laird Barron
The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All

Stephen Graham Jones
The Only Good Indians

Elizabeth Hand
A Haunting on the Hill

Mariana Enriquez
Our Share of Night

Paul Tremblay
The Cabin at the End of the World

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FILES FROM THE BLACK MUSEUM

THE LONG SHADOWS OF CLASSIC HORROR'S PAST

BY PAUL CORUPE

Sleight of Mind

"SELF-DELUSION AS A COPING MECHANISM (IS) REFLECTED ALL THE WAY BACK IN FILMS LIKE VETERAN HORROR DIRECTOR ROBERT FLOREY'S *THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS*."

It's one of the great ironies of our age – we may have unprecedented access to information, but that hasn't made it any easier to discern the truth in a sea of spin and competing viewpoints. Complicating our ability to make these judgement calls is that when faced with uncomfortable or inconvenient facts, we often prefer fiction. But pulling the wool over our own eyes isn't a modern phenomenon – we can see self-delusion as a coping mechanism reflected all the way back in films such as veteran horror director Robert Florey's *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946). Borrowing from both *The Hands of Orlac* (1924) and *Mad Love* (1935), this engaging killer-hand classic has now been reissued on Blu-ray from Warner Brothers.

The film is set in a spooky Italian mansion owned by aging concert pianist Francis Ingram (Victor Francen). One of the home's many live-in guests is nervous astrologist Hilary (Peter Lorre), who tolerates Ingram's abuse because he doesn't want to lose access to rare occult books in his benefactor's library. When the wheelchair-bound Ingram unexpectedly falls down the stairs to his death one evening, the other guests start plotting against the old man's sole heir, his live-in nurse Julie (Andrea King). But is Ingram really dead? His imposing grand piano plays by itself late at night and his more nefarious family members start turning up strangled. Local police investigator Castanio (J. Carrol Naish) opens Ingram's crypt only to discover one of the dead musician's hands are missing. Hilary starts to see this disembodied appendage – adorned with a distinctive, identifying ring – crawling around the mansion, and comes to believe that this phantom hand is carrying out Ingram's post-mortem revenge.

This simple plot synopsis doesn't do justice to *The Beast with Five Fingers*, which spends about half its running time establishing thick dramatic tension between the greedy, grasping relatives and acquaintances who live under Ingram's roof. But despite the large ensemble cast, most scenes are stolen by Lorre's sweaty, paranoid performance as Hilary. The meek student of the occult desperately clings to the library he believes will be sold off if Ingram's nephew regains control of his estate, even as he's haunted



by visions of Ingram's hand – he's the only one who seems to see it slithering around under its own power. As the bodies pile up, Julia comes to believe that it's Hilary who's behind the deaths, and that his hysterical claims of a killer hand are an unconscious fantasy designed to absolve his guilt. While the film is ambiguous about whether the hand is a supernatural phenomenon, a psychological fantasy or a simple parlour illusion, it's still undeniably deadly, as

Hilary discovers by the film's finale.

Self-delusion has never been seen in a particularly positive light, but there's been a movement over the last few years to highlight the benefits of walling yourself off in a fantasy world. There's been much talk about "manifesting" lately, as a kind of mental trick you can play on yourself to turn your aspirations into reality, and some authors have written extensively about how purposely overestimating your abilities can boost self-confidence and help you achieve unlikely goals. But a more common form of self-delusion these days is the way we allow ourselves to believe in tall tales simply because they're more compelling and satisfying than a real-life situation. Even long-time journalists were tricked by a false AI image of a neglected girl and her puppy stranded in the wake of Hurricane Milton this past fall, while others spread false political claims of pet-eating before the U.S. election – a smear that some candidates readily admitted was not true but that they still repeated to direct media attention. Even horror films have used our preference for fiction to their advantage – think back, for example, to the viral ads for 1999's *The Blair Witch Project* that played up the film's mythology as real.

Intentionally deluding yourself may seem like a mostly harmless act, but can the cold truth of reality really be kept at bay? Convincing yourself that you deserve that big promotion may not hurt others, but you might be setting yourself up for a massive blow to your ego when others give you a more honest assessment. So, squint your eyes and manifest your own destiny all you want – but just like Hilary in *The Beast with Five Fingers*, you shouldn't be surprised when others tell you that it's time to finally get a grip. 🐼



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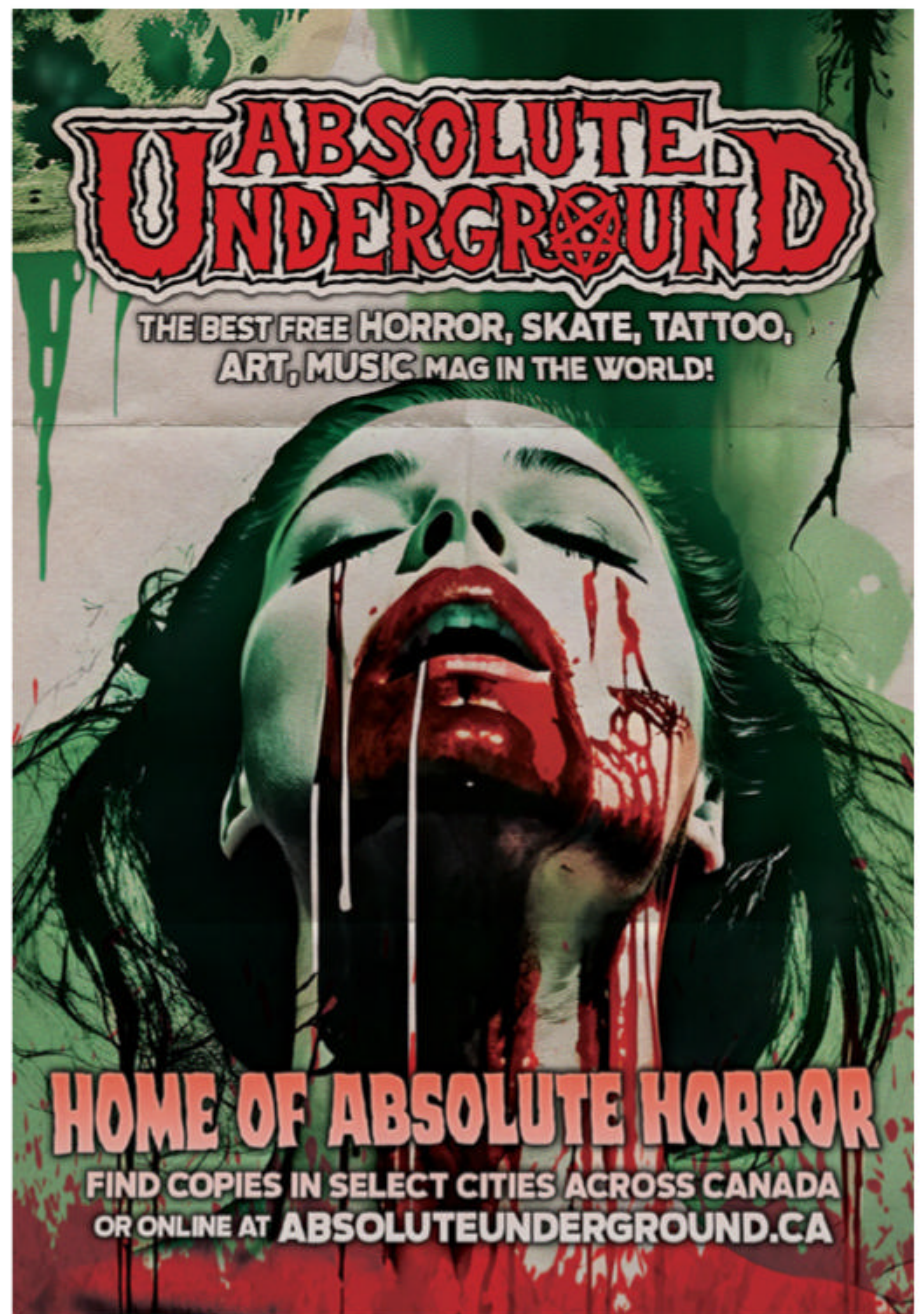
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BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Feudal Japan has been the setting for many a horror story: a natural fit for a country steeped in centuries of ghostly and demonic folklore. But *Dead Samurai*, a comic series set in 16th-century Japan, also incorporates one of the West's most potent contributions to the genre – the living dead.

"I was watching the 1980s *Shogun* miniseries three years ago and then followed by a few episodes of *Walking Dead* when it hit me," says writer John Dolmayan. "I love these two genres and yet I haven't seen anything that brings these worlds together. I said to myself, 'I want to see this happen so I may as well write it myself.'"

Dolmayan's resulting saga revolves around a young samurai, Shinzu, and his mission to serve and protect his master's clan. But Shinzu never bargained on a deadly plague sweeping Japan, or its victims rising up, transformed into flesh-eating monsters. After his lord's family are wiped out by the zombies, Shinzu is prepared to commit *seppuku* (samurai ritual suicide) to atone for his dishonour, until he discovers one of the clan's daughters, Akii, survived the massacre. Shinzu finds new meaning in his life as he leads the girl to safety, while trying to avoid bandits, rogue samurai, and of course, the undead.

Setting the story in feudal Japan allowed Dolmayan a unique approach for the well-trodden subgenre of gut-muncher tales.

"The main difference is that there is no effective way to destroy many zombies at the same time, as single combat was still the traditional way of fighting," says Dolmayan. "Communica-

tions would be limited as well, so it would be difficult to get the word out; people would have no clue as to what was happening until it was too late."

The result is a heavy workout for Shinzu's trusty katana, with plenty of slicing and dicing to satiate even the hungriest fan of flying heads. Shinzu may not enjoy the carnage, but artist Ryan Benjamin was more than happy to throw himself into the work, not only to deliver the gory goods but also to ensure a sense of authenticity.

"I really tried to change how I traditionally draw," he reveals. "The old architecture, traditional clothing, and natural landscapes must all express a sense of authenticity during that time. Also, the horror genre promotes tension through the use of spooky folklore and ominous environments. Part of my research was to actually visit old Japanese villages and hear stories from people who live in that country."

The results pay off, with striking settings and period details that ring true and enhance the grislier and bloodier aspects.

"The most thrilling part of creating feudal Japanese zombies is the combination of the rich, traditional visuals of the era with something horrifying," Benjamin explains. "The contrast of the elegance of samurai armour, kimonos, and ancient temples with decaying flesh, ragged clothing, and spooky expressions is unnerving and exciting. Also, I get a chance to combine



Dead Samurai: Zombies wreak havoc in 16th-century Japan.

manga comics and American comics together. Who wouldn't jump for that opportunity?"

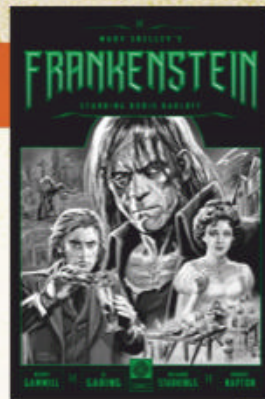
It's not all blood and guts, though, as Dolmayan wants the setting to be more than a backdrop, but rather a device to emphasize the characters' culture and motivations.

"Expect a fast-moving, suspense-filled story that takes time between action sequences to give the readers a deep understanding of the characters and their life's stories," he says. "The dangers they face are balanced with their personal journeys and pursuit of redemption in a world falling apart right before their eyes."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

QUICK CUTS

Boris Karloff's groundbreaking performance as the Frankenstein monster continues to be felt 85 years after his final appearance in that role, and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein Starring Boris Karloff* is a gorgeous love letter to both the original novel and the iconic actor who breathed life into Shelley's creation on the silver screen. Based primarily on the novel – with a handful of narrative embellishments – the book “casts” Karloff as the creature and offers a tantalizing glimpse of what his performance may have looked like had the original film skewed more closely to the source. Fans of the story will find little new here, with most of the major beats represented, shortened or re-adapted for the sake of expediency. What makes it stand out is the beautiful artwork which harkens back to the glory days of '70s horror magazines, with its expert use of shading and toning making this a textbook example of how to produce black-and-white horror comics. Even without Karloff's inclusion, the art alone would be enough to recommend this book – but his presence makes it irresistible.



Not to be outdone when it comes to long, awkward titles comes *Universal Monsters: Creature From the Black Lagoon Lives!*, another in Skybound/Image's series utilizing the famous movie monsters. However, unlike the *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* books, which adapted the original films from new perspectives, *Creature* is more of a loose sequel, taking place a few decades after the first movie. Having survived a near-drowning at the hands of a serial



killer, Kate Marsden tracks him to the Amazon, intent on getting revenge. Along the way she meets another survivor, this one at the claws of a seemingly mythical sea creature, before coming face-to-gills with the monster itself. While it may not be a direct continuation of the movie, the book nevertheless continues the exploration of many themes found in the film, including isolation, loneliness, and the nature of humanity. The result is a work that stands on its own, using the source material as a springboard for new ideas to explore while still providing the desired monster mayhem.

Lisa Storm and her friends are unashamedly groupies. Their next target: The Moon Show, a new up-and-coming band that has just signed a hot recording contract. A meeting with the girls at the Fox

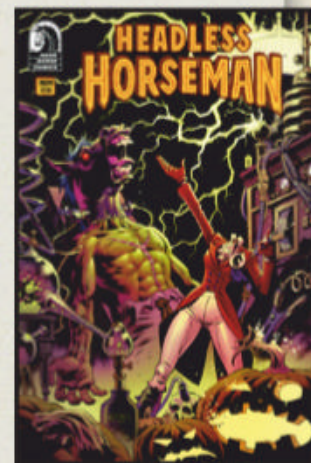
Club leads to a night of decadence, while something sinister lurks in the background (hint: the label that's just signed the band is called Asmodeus Records). A tale of sex, drugs, and the rocking occult, *Groupies* isn't breaking new ground when it comes to artists making deals with the Devil, though a tale told from the point of view of rabid fans has potential. The story falls somewhat flat, however, by making its heroines vacuous and annoying. Granted, a certain amount of superficiality and self-centredness can be expected given their lifestyle, but it makes for a grating read and results in nondescript and interchangeable characters. Perhaps a meeting with the forces of evil is just what they need to see the light.

Once a prominent comic artist, Stanley Kane is now middle-aged, overweight, unemployed, and hounded by his ex-wife, landlord, and bill collectors. As if that wasn't stressful enough, Stanley has a low tolerance for noise, which makes living in New York a real adventure. After a near-fatal heart attack, Stanley's agent ships him away to the town of Silence, population 108, for some much-needed peace and quiet. Since *Silence* is a horror comic, we can expect things to go sour, though we'll have to wait and see how the antique amulet Stanley purchased in the town's curio shop is con-



nected to a rash of grisly murders. Stanley is an interesting character, equally pathetic and sympathetic, and ultimately relatable, especially in his quest for calm – something we all desire in this stress-heavy world. Artist Alex Sanchez plays a key role in this representation, lending our protagonist some dignity in spite of his slovenly appearance.

In order for a horror anthology to succeed, the stories need to follow a certain pattern: they should zip along straightforwardly at a good pace, and the reader should understand the basics of the tale within the first two or three pages so they have some idea of where it's headed before having those expectations twisted by the end. This is where the five-story collection *Headless Horseman* Halloween Annual just misses the mark. In all cases, the story ideas are sound but get muddled with either too much exposition up front, confusing details, or bewildering conclusions. The most successful tale is “The Spice of Life (and Death),” about a non-conformist couple who move into the suburbs and must contend with neighbourhood rules and pumpkin-flavoured treats. Though it also suffers from an underwhelming climax, it at least manages to present its case with humour, satire, and a touch of the macabre. 🍷







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THIS HAUNTED HEAVEN: TEN STRANGE STORIES

Reggie Oliver
Tartarus Press

Each new collection from Reggie Oliver is an event to be cherished, and so is his latest. The subtitle announces *Ten Strange Stories*, alluding perhaps to Robert Aickman, Oliver's literary next of kin, together with M.R. James. Merging the strangeness of the former with the old school ghost story epitomized by the latter, Oliver delivers a brand of horror all his own.

He is at his best when he writes about actors (having been one himself), as in "South Riding," about a down-on-his-luck stage actor who ends up doing stale repertoire in an English coastal backwater in

front of an audience more dead than alive, or in "Grey Glass," depicting ghosts from a vain theatre actor's past acting through his mirror. Oliver is also powerful in reviving the past, as in the medieval Italy setting of "The Cardinal's Ring," about a murderer tormented by guilt, and when he deals with archaeological digs, as in the titular novelette, about the discovery of a temple devoted to Cybelle (a.k.a. Magna Mater) whose male devotees used to appease the goddess through self-castration. In "Chaos Regained," skeletons of the Nephilim (fallen angels from the Bible) are discovered near Gaza, in Israel, before it's unveiled that these entities are still around.

There are a few puzzling pieces, like "Fell Creatures" (concerning an alchemist's dollhouse that influences mutations in kids) and "The Ninth Curtain" (about a weirdly fractured space behind the curtain of an old inn), and a couple of lighter pieces (e.g. "From the Man-Seat," describing a haunted cubicle in a clothes store). Still, in all cases, whether dead serious or with a tongue-in-cheek, Oliver's smooth, eminently readable, and always intriguing prose is marked by the assured touch of a seasoned master.

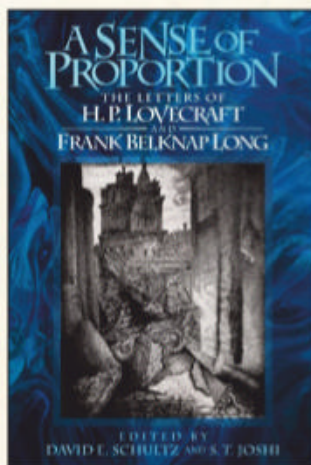
DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

A SENSE OF PROPORTION: THE LETTERS OF H.P. LOVECRAFT AND FRANK BELKNAP LONG

David E. Schultz and S.T. Joshi, eds.
Hippocampus Press

For those who'd like to take a deeper plunge into the mind from which Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth arose, there is no better way than reading their progenitor's letters. This volume reveals Lovecraft, again, as one of the last great masters of the lost art of letter-writing. Numerous are volumes of his correspondence already in existence, but the Hippocampus editions are supreme among them in that they have been meticulously and expertly edited by the world's premiere HPL scholars.

This volume deserves to be singled out (up there with his letters to August Derleth, Robert E. Howard, and Clark Aston Smith) because Frank Belknap Long was one of Lovecraft's closest friends and, as such, he has inspired a full spectrum of Lovecraftian thought, in its unrestrained and uncut form, revealing the author's many faces. At his lowest, we find his politically incorrect, New York-inspired rants. At his most sincere, on occasion of his mother's death, we read: "I myself am supremely unemotional, & do not indulge in outward & ostentatious signs of grief; but despite this have been rather prostrated, & hindered in eating & sleeping." What we see most often is Lovecraft at his very best: indulging in prolonged, detailed scientific-philosophic investigations into matter, energy, the universe, and spirit. One among such treatises is a letter dated Feb. 20, 1929, taking up almost twenty pages of this large-format edition and accompanied by fifteen footnotes which succinctly explain its references.



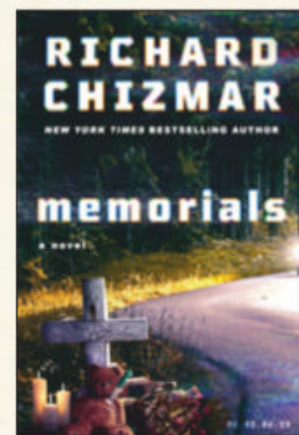
All in all, these letters are both revealing and mystifying – because, even after all is said, there's a feeling that some mystery still remains behind the mask.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

MEMORIALS

Richard Chizmar
Gallery Books

Live long enough and you're bound to come across a few roadside memorials, those haunting tributes to lives cut short. Whether adorned with pictures, candles, handwritten notes or items of sentimental value, these memorials have the power to conjure up feelings of remorse, sadness, and stark reflection. They remind us to hold the ones we love close because we never know how long any of us will get. Within the depths of Richard Chizmar's fiction, these memorials become impossible to ignore, impossible to shake, impossible to run from.



When Troy, Melody, and Billie proposed their group assignment for their American Studies class, they couldn't

have been more different from each other: Troy, the uber shy brainiac from the rough side of town; Melody, the beautiful kindhearted country girl; and Billie, the popular athletics guy struggling to rebuild his life after his parents died in a car crash. Their differences become a common bond as they set out along the Appalachian backwoods in a borrowed VW van, seeking roadside memorials and uncovering the oft-forgotten stories they represent. Little do they realize that some stories are best left to the dead.

This slow-burn thriller lures readers along a razor's edge that cuts deeper with every nuanced stroke of the author's pen. While the roadway ahead is paved in grief and broken lives, its centre thinly separates what is real from what is too terrifying to believe. Even as the students sense an eerie presence lurking wherever they go, it's a fleeting concern at most until whatever is following them manifests itself in ways that can't be denied or explained in rational terms. The further they push to complete their project, the closer they venture toward a staggering truth with the capacity to shatter so many lives.

A suspenseful road trip adventure, *Memorials* slowly presses on the accelerator all the way to an explosive twist ending that's bound to break your heart. And, oh yes, objects in the mirror are much closer than they appear.

RICK HIPSON

THIS HAUNTED HEAVEN

Reggie Oliver



Tartarus Press



Repo! The Genetic Opera (2008)

BLOOD SAGA: DISSECTING THE CULT FILM REPO! THE GENETIC OPERA

Staci Wilson

1984 Publishing



Repo! The Genetic Opera (2008) continues to attract oddballs worldwide with its weird world of surgery, sci-fi, and song. And prolific author/film journalist/filmmaker Staci Wilson celebrates that weirdness with her slim but still overlong tribute/history *Blood Saga: Dissecting the Cult Film Repo! The Genetic Opera*.

To recap, *Repo* was Darren Lynn Bousman cashing in the credit he had accrued directing two *Saw* films (II and III) and gambling it on his dream project: an underground LA rock opera film about a future where widespread organ failure leads to people getting designer innards on credit which get repossessed if they can't pay. *Repo*'s eclectic cast included Kevin "ohGr" Ogilvie from Canadian industrial band

Skinny Puppy, horror movie icon Bill Moseley (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*), and reality TV star Paris Hilton. The studio had no idea how to market it, so Bousman took a print on the road, helping build a cult following that embraced its costumes, music, and strangeness.

Wilson covered the film professionally and went on to collaborate artistically with both ohGr and co-writer Darren Smith, so she was a natural to write this history, which gathers quotes not just from Bousman, Smith, and *Repo* co-writer Terrance Zdunich (who also plays the film's narrator) but an army of collaborators and admirers. They recount the play's origins, the movie's production and thwarted distribution, and its triumphant resurrection as a cult film thanks to legions of admirers keeping it alive through online forums and international shadow casts.

Wilson lays out *Repo*'s history in skillful detail, although her use of quotes from the soundtrack and film reviews feels like padding. At a breezy 128 pages, *Blood Saga* is a worthy tribute to a weird film that shouldn't – and doesn't always – work, but that touched the hearts of its fans just as its protagonist ripped them from his victims.

SEAN PLUMMER

SPIRITUS EX MACHINA: DARK TALES OF CREATION

LC Von Hessen

Grimscribe Press

This debut collection brings a particular kind of freshness through a well-informed dialogue with the genre's tradition. The stories' style occasionally invokes classical horror literature, only to shock you with a modern turn of phrase – or a provocative idea. They may keep returning to spectral machines and factories, dummies, puppets, or mannequins, but their uncanny effect is a decidedly 21st-century post-human turn on E.T.A. Hoffmann – or Thomas Ligotti, whose writings they strikingly resemble. Yet, despite a host of outsiders (and explicit references to Innsmouth, Arkham, and Miskatonic University), these characters – unlike Lovecraft's – mostly embrace the otherness. Or else, as in the delightful HPL pastiche "The Spectral Golem," they are mocked for sticking to their family heirlooms. Usually they go further, like the descendant

DANTE'S PICK



THE QUEEN

Nick Cutter

Gallery Books

How do you feel about bugs? How about them feeding on, breeding in/with, and gestating inside people? Now that the entomophobic among us have safely exited this review, let's continue.

Nick Cutter's buzzy, squelchy, oftentimes outright gross new horror novel *The Queen* arrives to much-deserved hype. Primarily taking place over two devastating days, it's a tightly plotted, incredibly gory book that clips along at breakneck pace. When Margaret wakes up to an iPhone on her doorstep, allegedly from her missing (presumed dead) best friend, it ends up being the most normal thing that happens all day. Teaming up with her friend Harry, the pair are guided by a series of texts and calls to increasingly bizarre places and scenes. Only in the book's second part does it become clear that this is a mad entomologist-type tale – and Cutter's planted us right at the fuck-around-and-find-out stage.

Obscenely wealthy Rudyard Crate survived a horrific, disfiguring ant attack as a boy, leading him to develop a perverse obsession with insects, and their bites and stings; now regularly loosing them on his body as a pleasurable personal ritual. His experimentation in splicing insects with humans – in a manner both highly unethical and icky – is what's driving the gruesome events Margaret has been summoned to witness, and hopefully survive.

The Queen is also a story of evolving teenage friendships and taking back stolen agency, among other things, but that's likely not what readers will remember, as all that's dwarfed by the body horror set pieces, from a building-sized wasp's nest to the human-insect mutations, each described in brutal, unflinching, extremely gooey detail. That the characters and narrative details are so well-drawn around them elevates this from a run-of-the-mill B-style bug book to one devastatingly executed by a practiced master of horror fiction. All the better to make you squirm!

Read with a can of Raid nearby.



MONICA S. KUEBLER

IN HIS NEW NOVEL, GRADY HENDRIX INJECTS THE SUPERNATURAL INTO THE VERY REAL HORRORS OF HOMES FOR UNWED MOTHERS

THE TERROR OF TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

IT'S 1970, AND FROM THE MOMENT PREGNANT FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD NEVA IS DROPPED OFF AT WELLWOOD HOUSE BY HER EMBARRASSED FATHER, SHE'S STRIPPED OF HER NAME, HER HISTORY, and her agency. Subjected to endless rules, punitive chores, and invasive physical exams, she's treated as little more than a shameful, inconvenient incubator for a child that will soon be someone else's – whether she wants to give her baby up or not. This is the plight faced by the girls in Grady Hendrix's new novel *Witchcraft for Wayward Girls* (out from Berkley on January 14), just as it was the plight of many real girls a half-century ago. For Hendrix, this book is a particularly personal one.

"I have two relatives who were both 'sent away' as they said, and no one knew that until they were much, much older," he explains. "One was in her seventies or eighties and the other was in her early seventies, late sixties. It always haunted me that, you know, both of them had had kids...that were out there that they never knew. The kids could be alive or dead or whatever. And so, it always kind of ate at me. I wanted to write the book, and it felt like the right time to do it."

Despite the personal inspiration and his deep passion for the subject matter, the story did not come easily for Hendrix, leaving him feeling like he may have bitten off more than he could chew. He buried himself in research and ended up blowing his deadline. In the end, the book took six to seven months longer than expected to complete.

"I didn't quite anticipate how hard this book would be to write," he allows. "You know, it's a witch book and, like, the first couple of drafts didn't even have witches in it. It was more of a folk horror thing."

Witches ultimately helped solidify the narrative. In *WFWG*, witchcraft enters the girls' lives via the elderly librarian who lends them a book called *How to Be a Groovy Witch*, giving the girls their first taste of power in this otherwise powerless time. That it comes with some mighty big strings at-

tached is a concern for later.

"Witches make a lot of sense [for this narrative]," Hendrix notes. "Witches have always been associated with children and childbirth, whether it's witches eating children or killing children or making flying ointment out of babies or the idea that witches were midwives, who were falsely accused of witchcraft."

That said, the witches here are neither villains nor selfless saviours. *WFWG* is much more complicated and nuanced. Everyone has an agenda, and none of these agendas are necessarily ill-intentioned, aside from the egregious ways they are carried out. As witchcraft invades Wellwood, its owner is cursed with an unnatural pregnancy (resulting in the birth of a bucketful of wriggling eels) and the house is pummelled with a rainstorm of rocks. Yet, arguably, the most startling, visceral sequences result from the human body itself, as Hendrix holds up an unflinching lens to the act – and potential complications – of childbirth.

"I've always thought it's so weird that I can write a book where rats eat an old lady and no one bats an eye," he says, "but I show a character giving birth, something that happens tens of thousands of times a day, and people get really shaken and upset. I was very squeamish about childbirth and labour and things before I wrote this. And by the time I was writing this, I'd looked at so many videos and so many photos and talked to so many people and really gotten the details that I was kind of fascinated by it. ... So that was something I really wanted to get right."

Another thing *WFWG* gets right is the complicated nature of maternal feelings, giving the book surprising emotional weight and resonance. It all feels painfully topical in a time where abortion rights are being curtailed in the U.S. While this wasn't on Hendrix's mind while writing, there seems to be an unintentional warning here that homes like Wellwood could reappear. 🐾





of the mad painter Richard Pickman in “The Medium and the Message,” who discovers a proper use of his ancestor’s “Red Canvas” and film reels...

There is a “blend of the carnal and the oneiric” that Michael Cisco points out in his introduction, but the sexuality of these stories covers a range wider than usual: some of their characters are virginal or asexual, others prefer attachment to machines (like the carnival protagonist of “An Infernal Machine”), while some (e.g. in “Wormspace”) prefer to exist as mermaids, or worms. They all strive to transcend

their uncomfortable flesh, their suffocating identities, even towards utter indifference, as in “The Patent-Master,” whose protagonist comes to the island coastal town searching for their mother’s past, only to find release in discovering what it really means to be out of hope.

Covering a full range from cleverly reimagined tradition to courageously experimental bursts into the unknown, this is a landmark collection from a distinctive new voice.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

AFTERLIFE: THE CAMPGROUND

Dacre Black
(Self-published)

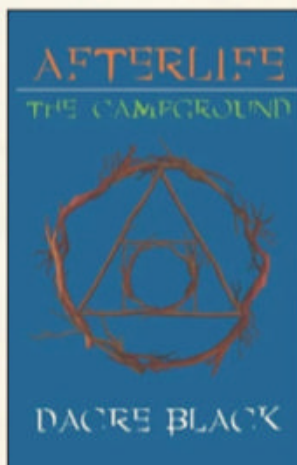
Paranormal investigator Dick Draven apparently has the world’s most dangerous job. In *Afterlife: The Campground*’s 204 pages, he’s beheaded by an invisible entity, shot with an arrow, and ends up with a live grenade jammed in his mouth, sans pin. And with a little magical assistance, he shrugs off all these things, treating them, for the most part, as just another day at the office. Whether Draven’s cavalier attitude renders him endearing or rings odd and unbelievable will likely come down to the type of reader you are.

The Campground marks indie author Dacre Black’s third outing featuring Draven following 2021’s *Afterlife: The Gatekeeper* and *Afterlife: The Neon Mall* (released earlier this year), and it closely follows the events of those books. In his latest, Black has Draven arriving more than a year late to an investigation – or is it a trap, as the attempts on his life seem to suggest? The novel, which features a creepy warded island cemetery and a series of employee disappearances that forced the camp to close, also continues the Genesis Jackson plotline from previous books, making this a more rewarding read if you start from the beginning.

Black’s got some storytelling chops and there’s a handful of notable spooky set pieces here, including a man who’s been fused with a tree and the secrets that lie in wait beneath the lake, but *The Campground* also – for better or worse – wears its indie-ness on its sleeve. The dialogue is at times jilted and feels unnatural, speech tags are overused, a shocking disability slur pops up out of nowhere mid-book (for no discernably good reason), and punctuation and word usage errors show up with unfortunate regularity – all things a quality editor could have helped suss out.

The Campground’s more diamond in the rough than five-star glamping experience. However, much like bedding down in a sleeping bag slung out on a bumpy stretch of earth under the stars next to a haunted graveyard, there are still some supernatural pleasures to be had here... if that’s your kind of thing.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

LOST IN THE MAZE

Sometimes stories follow the expected beats, their anticipated twists and turns drawing readers in with the comforting allure of the familiar. Other narratives are like mazes, beckoning those who dare step into their pages to traverse them more than once, looking for meaning in all their strange nooks and crannies. Sofia Ajram’s short novel *Coup de Grâce* (out now from Titan Books) falls squarely into the latter category, with its “No Hope. No Exit” tagline and unsettling liminal spaces and stark moments of body horror. It’s the kind of novel this column was created to explore and yet, at the same time, a book I dare not spend too much time trying to interpret – not because it frightens me, but because I think each of us might take something different away, depending on our lived experiences, and I’d hate to get in the way of that. Even more so, because at roughly the three-quarter mark, the novel becomes a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-style outing, allowing readers to select a denouement for our hapless protagonist.

Coup de Grâce is, as the author’s note alerts us, “a story primarily about depression and suicide,” and indeed, we meet Vicken on his way to throw himself into the river, but he’s distracted by an unexpected hookup with a handsome stranger. From there, the book swerves into the weird, after Vicken finds himself in a mostly deserted and seemingly endless subway station. Almost everything is concrete and grey, and there are no exits. It’s a place where nothing makes sense and horrifying scenarios await down hallways that exist and then suddenly don’t.

For folks who’ve been to dark places mentally, there’s a feeling that while this could be a real space, it’s just as likely that Vicken has become lost in the maze of his own deteriorating mental state. He meets a fellow captive named Pashmina but she doesn’t survive long, and soon he’s back to wandering alone amongst the unending brutalist architecture, discovering unlikely unmanned *dépanneurs* (a.k.a. convenience stores) and places where the concrete has meshed with other humans, entombing flesh and rendering them immobile.

Coup de Grâce works as well as it does because it utterly unmoors the reader from any solid sense of reality. It would not be a stretch to call Vicken the most unreliable narrator to ever narrate anything. Readers should expect to be lost and confused and yet utterly enthralled as they attempt to make sense of all this alongside Ajram’s long-suffering protagonist.

Not a difficult book to read, but a challenging one to fully digest – heavy as it is with claustrophobia and existential dread – *Coup de Grâce* marks the arrival of a noteworthy new voice to the Canadian genre fiction scene.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com



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THIS MONTH:
THE SPINE-CHILLING SKETCHES OF CODY SCHIBI

A **RODMORGE** COLLECTIBLE



Cody Schibi likes to illustrate scenes of horror, bringing them to life with his own unique personality and sense of humour. Often recreating monsters from his favourite horror movies, he is also known to give life to fiends from his own imagination. Bold ink lines and vivid colour washes give his work the playful energy of a party of monsters, ghosts, and ghouls... a party to which everyone is invited.

NAME

Cody Schibi

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"I was born and raised in Harlingen, Texas, but Austin has been my homebase for most of my life."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"I predominately work traditionally with ink and watercolour. I scan everything in to either clean them up or add digital colours. I love doing screen prints as well, so I'm always looking for a reason to do those, and I enjoy painting with acrylics now and then."

DEEDS

"I taught art from kindergarten to fifth grade at a private school for a few years, and teaching those kiddos to be original and create what *they* want has been a true highlight. Inspiring minds while making people feel confident and proud to be themselves is always a goal for me."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"Creative minds inspire me! Fellow artists, film (mostly horror!), music, writers, etc... Seeing all these things being created inspires my brain and art."

LAST WORDS

"If you're reading this, know that you are *amazing* and you're doing just fine!"

RESTING PLACE

Find Cody on social platforms [@codyschibi](#), including art streams on Twitch!

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM
[@PAIGEREYNOLDSART](#)



A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY
STACIE
PONDER

BESIDES THE OBVIOUS JOYS OF BEING AN OLD (EATING DINNER AT 3:30 P.M., GOING TO BED BY 6), ONE OF

the things I like most is finding new appreciations for horror movies. Sometimes that's discovering a movie I shook my fist at fifteen years ago is actually pretty okay. Other times it's all about seeing aspects of a beloved film in a new light, as is the case with a character from a little flick you may have heard of, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

I'd say that it was my recent celebration of *Chainsaw's* nifty 50th at a local theatre that has put a reassessment of the hapless Franklin forefront in my brain, but truth be told, that reassessment's been languishing in the back seat of my mind for a few years now. The only thing that whines more loudly than Franklin is Leatherface's saw, and boy oh boy I could not wait for the two to meet and for the former to cross over to the big turquoise van in the sky. During one fateful viewing, however, a detail whacked me on the head with a hammer, dragged me into a back room, and slammed the steel door on my negative Franklin feelings forever. And as with all the best and worst things in life, that detail concerns a sausage: specifically, the sausage that ol' Franklin picks up at the gas station and nibbles on for a while. That sausage is at least partially – if not wholly – made of human meat!

Listen, whether it's born of necessity, business, or a simple case of the munchies, voluntarily engaging in cannibalism is one thing. But unwittingly partaking because someone snuck some *person meat* into that sausage you picked up at a grimy gas station is a wheelchair too far! I say this with full knowledge that human flesh is likely the *least* questionable thing one might find in there, but still! My thunderclap realization of his involuntary cannibalism prompted my first-ever "Aw man, poor Franklin," and with that, the empathy floodgates opened. Sure, he's whiny, but sausage aside, he really goes through it in *Chainsaw*, long before any power tools enter the equation. I think we've been too hard on the lad over the past 50 years and I'm here to beg your consideration in turning the hate-narrative around.

The first time we meet Franklin, we see what a struggle it is for him to get his wheelchair out of a decidedly wheelchair-unfriendly van, a struggle that's only compounded when he tries to urinate into a coffee can on the side of the road. Then he takes a long tumble down a hill, which would prove to be

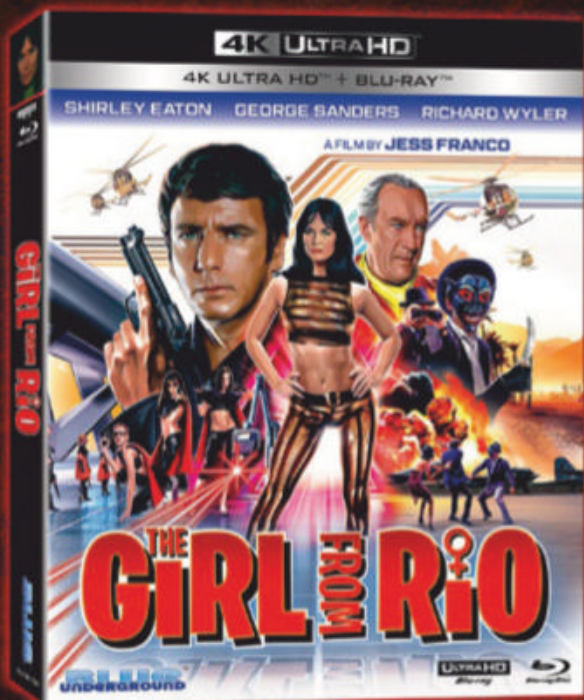
only his first of many physical calamities on that very long, very hot day. He's the only one in the van who's nice to the sketchy hitchhiker, engaging him in conversation and treating him like he's not an absolutely unsettling weirdo. And what thanks does Franklin get? He gets his hand sliced open by what you can surely bet is the most unhygienic pocket knife this side of the Bible belt. After the hitchhiker is left on the side of the road, Franklin makes some solid observations: What was that guy up to? Will he come back for revenge? Does the blood smear on the van hold any special meaning? What about the other members of the hitchhiker's "whole family of Draculas"? I used to take Pam as *Chainsaw's* prophesizing Cassandra-type, what with her eerie astrology reads and horoscopes of doom, but what of Franklin? His messaging went as unheeded as that of *Friday the 13th's* Crazy Ralph, and we all know how *that* went down.

Franklin is undeniably at his most annoying when the gang arrives at the decrepit family home: he yells, blows raspberries at Sally and her friends, and mocks them all in a voice that is like razor blades across your eardrums... and I say, good for him. They invited him to one of the most wheelchair-unfriendly places in Texas under the guise of promised "fun," only to promptly abandon him so they could frolic, cavort, and canoodle. If anything, I say that Franklin should've been *more* loud and annoying about it.

It's my hope that by the time *Chainsaw's* sixtieth rolls around, fans and enthusiasts will see Franklin Hardesty as the truly not-the-worst character that he is. Give him a chance, and be discerning when it comes to questionable gas station meats – is that really so much to ask? 🍖

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AUDIO DROME

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DANGEROUS

DECENT

DULL

DRIVEL

DOA
DEAD ON
ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY JESSICA BUCK, ALEX DELLER, JILLIAN DRACHMAN,
PAT LIGHTELP, AND AARON VON LUPTON



OUROBONIC PLAGUE

ELECTRONIC

Slop

VERTIGO CULT

Ever been broken down so badly that you had to begin the process of rebuilding just to find yourself? That's kind of the idea behind *Slop* (maybe not the most appropriate album title) by Australian dark electronic outfit Ourobonic Plague. Having existed previously as somewhat of an amped-up drum and bass act, OP offers something far slower and moodier with serious overlays of noise on its lengthy latest effort. What's lovely, though, is its horror-inspired underbelly, including B-movie warblings on "Guts," icy cold synths on "Tribe," and the gothic underpinnings of "Church." There's something about this release that very much belongs in the club, and one could likely slot *Slop* under the witch-house banner, so don't look for Ourobonic Plague to be scoring horror films just yet, but if you've got a penchant for horror flicks of all eras and subgenres, this massive outbreak is at least worth investigating. ☠☠☠½ AVL



XOLTERGEIST

Xoltergeist

(INDEPENDENT)

Crawling out of some primordial swamp comes the experimental one-man act Xoltergeist. Come to think of it, if you could make a field recording of that black patch of goop from Stephen King's "The Raft," it might sound like this. While it might be

easiest to lump Xoltergeist as a metal act, the music goes much further than that, sounding sort of like a mix of very primitive punk rock and black metal with a healthy dose of Halloween synths, programmed drums, and an overall Samhain swing. Written and recorded in just three days by Dirt Boucher (drummer/synth player for Bleak Magician, who you've also probably never heard of but sounds far more polished), *Xoltergeist* is far too rough and D.I.Y. to be taken seriously. Maybe next year will treat us to a new album worth talking about.

☠☠ AVL



BLACK VALLEY MOON

SURF

Curses, Wishes, & Haunted Transmissions Vol. 1 & 2

(INDEPENDENT)

Sometimes music conveys that which is difficult to put into words. Such is the case with Black Valley Moon's *Curses, Wishes, & Haunted Transmissions Vol. 1 and 2*, which celebrates everything dark and horrific via ten surf and rockabilly-infused songs including "Black Hole," "New Funeral," "Dracula's Hot Rod," and "Spirit Box." Aiming to please surf purists, the band divides its release into two halves: one with vocal-led tracks and instrumental pieces on the other. A smart choice, as *Vol. 2* really lets loose with wailing saxophone throughout "The Phantom Weeps" and an overall appropriate level of grooviness elsewhere. While the lead guitar swaggers throughout both volumes, it's especially notable when the music is not diluted by vocal lines. Conversely, the tracks on *Vol. 1* sometimes feel forced; the lyrics and rhyme scheme in "The Long Walk Home" in particular seem more like placeholder ideas than parts of a finished product. Overall, both volumes are worth a listen as they each foster plenty of spooky vibes. ☠☠☠ JB



GROOVIE GHOU LIES

PUNK

Freaks on Parade

STARDUMB/ECCENTRIC POP RECORDS

The only thing better than the monster cereal-sweet pop punk of California's Groovie Ghoulies is all these damn vinyl reissues that never stop reanimatin'. Originally a six-song EP released in 2001, *Freaks on Parade* marked the Ghoulies' departure from Lookout Records to Stardumb, who is also responsible for this sweet Godzilla-green marbled wax version. What difference did that make? Not a helluva lot – as the title suggests, the album was a tribute to misfits and weirdos everywhere, and the music followed the tradition of cute, Ramones-y, three-chord punk jams about monsters, cartoons, and journeys to outer space. Now, it's an album with six rarities and hard-to-find tracks, including a cover of "The Time Warp" and two fan favourites from a Japanese EP. Plus, cool new artwork by Tom Neely dedicated to Big-G! As far as reissues like these



VOSFORIS

METAL

Cosmic Cenotaph

INNER HELL

UK metal act Vosforis is facing down some big topics with this debut album, essentially contemplating the meaninglessness of life, the universe, and everything in between. From individual insignificance to the fact that our planet is but a piss-splash on the great cosmic bathroom floor, the band's philosophy would make the likes of Lovecraft, Ligotti, and Laird Barron proud. Musically, we're in craggy black metal terrain with no end of icy, scything riffs and strangled rasps on offer. While the fact that three of the players – drummer Adrian Erlandsson, along with guest musicians Anabelle Iratni and Richard Shaw – served time in Cradle of Filth might be telling, there's more to *Cosmic Cenotaph* than corpse paint and nihilism. The keyboard refrains

EVIL DEAD THE MUSICAL

SOUNDTRACK

Various

STARVISTA MUSIC

Raise a severed hand if you thought *Evil Dead The Musical* would still be soaking audiences with blood twenty years after debuting in 2003. Here we are though, and StarVista is serving up the 2006 cast recording on vinyl for the first time (previously only available as a CD through some lame Time Life release). If somehow you haven't witnessed this theatrical phenomenon yet, *Evil Dead's* musical numbers are suitably rated-R, with just enough sexual innuendo and gore to keep fans satisfied. Ryan Ward, who plays Ash, delivers a good mix of Elvis, Rodney Dangerfield and, of course, the Chin. All of that said, while the tunes spotlight a mix of doo wop, crunchy metal guitar, and even funk, these are still showtunes and if that ain't your thang, this record won't change your mind, especially when it's divorced from the visuals. Still, this vinyl pressing is excellent, coming through as crisp and clear as the cold winter air... and twice as groovy. ☠☠☠ AVL



PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

OBITCHUARY PODCAST

THEME: Death and Obituaries

FORMAT: Conversation

FREQUENCY: Weekly

Death is no laughing matter, but horror fans know that sometimes the best way to confront our inevitable demise is to get silly with it. In 2021, best friends Madison Reyes and Spencer Henry took to the podwaves with the launch of *Obitchuary*, a podcast where they gather to read and discuss obits that go beyond the typical pleasantries. Now a weekly show with close to 200 episodes, *Obitchuary* is anchored by their mutual fascination with these post-mortem memoirs as well as their charisma and engaging sense of humour.

Some of the obits they cover are truly bonkers – predictably terrible tributes written by AI, for example. But the best episodes are the ones that bring the drama along with the lolz, like the story of a newspaper that ran two nearly identical obituaries for the same man – one submitted by his wife, and the other by his girlfriend; or those wonderful write-ups submitted by family members who don't shy away from describing what the deceased was *really* like.

To round things out, each host provides a short presentation on something death-related. This runs the gamut from professional mourners, to exploding caskets and death erections. Listeners may well learn something about Cotard's syndrome (a living person's belief that they are actually dead), thanatophobia (an intense fear of death and dying), or Lazarus syndrome (where one comes back to life after being declared dead).

While the utmost respect is paid to the deceased and their loved ones (names are often changed), Reyes and Henry approach these topics in a light and humorous tone, favouring laughs over tears – just don't get them talking about animal deaths. Oftentimes caught up in the details, the hosts occasionally descend into bouts of shrieking laughter or some exploit from their personal lives.

Perhaps fuelled by the insatiable thirst for media content during the pandemic lockdowns, *Obitchuary* gained traction very quickly, expanding to include live show tours and the launch of a book. Released in August of 2024 via Plume, *Obitchuary: The Big Hot Book of Death* is an amusing and poignant exploration of all things macabre, with chapters including "Coffin Confessions," "Executions to Die For," and "If These Dolls Could Speak." Much like the podcast, the book is an irreverent look at the physical aspects of death, in addition to the ways North Americans choose to remember those they've lost.

Not a scary podcast by any means, *Obitchuary* offers listeners the same dark, funny, and often gross aspects of death that are found in the genre. If you're morbid-minded, or simply curious about what happens at the end of the road, this is your jam.

JESSICA BUCK



recall everything from '50s sci-fi to Fulci, while the mechanized clank of "Childhood's End" leans into the band's industrial influences and suggests a fondness for the cold, grinding hell of Godflesh.

☠☠☠ AD



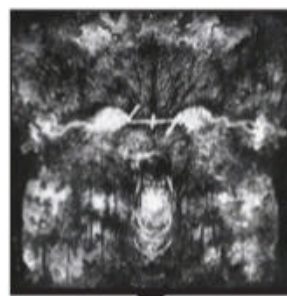
NECRONOMICON EX MORTIS

METAL

The Mother of Death

(INDEPENDENT)

What Necronomicon Ex Mortis does might not be pretty, but you can hardly fault the gusto with which the band buries its snout in guts, gore, and giblets. *The Mother of Death* offers up face-shredding solos, crunchtacular riffing, and macabre gurgles by the bucketful, as the band charges through the five tracks with truly infectious glee. Acts like Ripped to Shreds, At the Gates, and Carcass serve as sonic points of reference while thematically, NEM tucks into plenty of *Rue Morgue*-friendly fodder. Ideas are lifted from *The Conjuring 3* and *Salem's Lot* (the latter being at least the third Stephen King title plundered by the band, after previous nods to *Cycle of the Werewolf* and *The Dead Zone*) while the *Resident Evil* and *Dishonored* video game franchises are also paid homage. Opener *Trick or Treat*, meanwhile, sees NEM crafting an original tale of its own – wonder if there are any Shudder execs out there listening? ☠☠☠ AD



APTORIAN DEMON

METAL

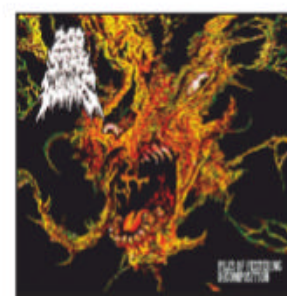
Liv Tar Slutt

KYRCK PRODUCTIONS & ARMOUR

The great Norwegian beast Aptorian Demon, brainchild of Storhetsvanviddets Mester, now rears its head after twelve years to present the

truly excellent *Liv Tar Slutt*. This remarkably frightful (and often barbaric) black metal offering begins with a beautiful assortment of agonized cries, as if to warn listeners that there is simply no turning back. Indeed, Aptorian Demon shackles us within the sonic torture chambers that it so artfully constructs, promising the rotten fruits of misery and death. Both the electric and acoustic guitars intrigue and seduce. Lovers of witches, rejoice: thoroughly disturbing screams, spoken lines, growls, and whispers combine to create the perfect late-October number on "Die Hexe von Buchenwald." Ultimately, however, the record seems more akin to a collection of miscellaneous gems than a unified whole. All the same, *Liv Tar Slutt* amounts to a must-take pill of insanity so potent it'll have you cracking a psychopathic smile.

☠☠☠ JB



200 STAB WOUNDS

METAL

Piles of Festering Decomposition

METAL BLADE

200 Stab Wounds is a nonstop touring beast of an act, grabbing legions of new fans and unleashing death metal brutality wherever it goes. Birthed just prior to the COVID pandemic, the band has risen to carry on the classic death metal torch that touches on the likes of flagship names Morbid Angel and Cannibal Corpse. *Piles of Festering Decomposition* is a reissue of its first EP, originally released by Maggot Stomp in 2020 and it's a hell of a debut. Clocking in at just five songs, the EP kicks off with the suitably pummeling and groove-laced "Maggot Casket" and wraps up with a cover of Carcass classic "Ruptured in Purulence" with no filler in between. Ultimately, *Piles of Festering Decomposition* lays the foundation perfectly for a band that just gets better with each release. Fans of their latest, *Manual Manic Procedures*, released earlier this year, should definitely check out what started it all. If 200 Stab Wounds is playing anywhere near you, don't miss that show! ☠☠☠ PL



AN UNHOLY TRIO

WHAT'S THE BEST HORROR SOUNDTRACK ARTIST YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF? RIGHT NOW, IT MIGHT JUST BE CANADA'S BLITZ//BERLIN. WITH ONE FOOT IN INDIE HORROR (NOTABLY THE FILMS of fellow Canuck Steve Kostanski), and another in Hollywood (primarily through trailer work), it's tough to narrow the band down to a single niche – but if its musical output is any indication, you'll want to keep an ear out for these sounds. Made up of high school pals Martin Macphail, Dean Rode, and Tristan Tarr, Blitz//Berlin actually began as a punk band (hence the punk staple "Blitz" in the name).

"Our journey as a band is definitely what you'd call non-linear," Mcphail told me over email from Nashville last fall. "We signed our first record deal as a punk band years ago, moved to the big city [Toronto], and the band promptly imploded. Then, for a period of time we made a lot of frankly unlistenable experimental music. From that chaotic time we somehow emerged with a new sound, which led us to begin making music for film and TV."

The band had a relatively auspicious introduction to the genre, when they came on board to score Kostanski and Jeremy Gillespie's 2016 Lovecraftian horror hit *The Void*. That meeting of mad minds led to the trio handling scores for a number of relatively small Canadian horror films before tackling *Blade Runner 2036: Nexus Dawn*, the 2017 short film that acted as a prequel for *Blade Runner 2049*. More Kostanski mayhem ensued with *Psycho Goreman* (2020) and, very recently, *Frankie Freako* (2024), the writer/director's homage to little creature features like *Ghoulies* and *Gremlins*.

"Steve has always had a very clear vision for the world of his films," says Macphail. "To begin the process he gives us some films to watch and study; in this case it was *Body Double* and *Ghoulies Go to College*,

and a few others. From the beginning, the goal was to sound like the film wanted Danny Elfman but couldn't afford him. We dug deep on synths, and recording and production techniques to try and live faithfully in that world."

So yeah, if you're at all nerdy about soundtrack music, you're probably already in love with Blitz//Berlin. But here's the thing: while the band is in deep in the indie horror world, it has also been composing music for A-list Hollywood trailers including *Bird Box* (2018), *Velvet Buzzsaw* (2019), *Lovecraft Country* (2020), and, believe it or not, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022).

"The wildest thing about creating music for trailers is you almost never get to see footage, so you're scoring based on an email description," says Macphail. "*Maverick* specifically was incredibly competitive, and somehow our track stood out and was chosen by Tom Cruise."

Let's not forget that these guys are also a Juno Award-winning band, best known for its three *Movements* albums released between 2016 and 2019. At the tail end of last year, Blitz//Berlin released *Beneath the Door is Open Sky*, a moody, modern cinematic number with shades of Cliff Martinez and Angelo Badalamenti. While some of the music is taken from the band's score work, the standout track will obviously be "All the Pretty Horses" featuring guest vocals from none other than Kiefer Sutherland.

"The original version of this song had a gravelly demo vocal on it, so we made a shortlist of vocalists we'd love to work with, and Kiefer was at the top," says Macphail. "He was so kind and excited about the song and set aside the time to visit our studio and record his vocals. His performance elevated this song beyond anything we could've hoped."

Okay, enough gushing. As of press time, Blitz//Berlin is on the road recording a yet-to-be-announced project, but my prediction for 2025 is to expect big things in the horror movie music world from this unholy trio. 🖤



PLAY DEAD



NOW PLAYING > MENACE FROM THE DEEP, AMANDA THE ADVENTURER 2



MENACE FROM THE DEEP

Flatcoons/Gamersky Games
PC

Are you the type of gamer who's lost entire days to dark roguelike deckbuilders such as *Inscription* and *Slay the Spire*? Have you defeated those titles and are now seeking new fuel for that unholy addiction? Well, rejoice! Your next stop is Lovecraft country; the tainted seaside town of Innsmouth to be precise, where something strange and decidedly nasty is pushing itself up from the deep.

For those familiar with *Slay the Spire*, *Menace from the Deep* feels like a more complex version. For everyone else, the learning curve is steep but not insurmountable; to help, the game recommends playing a few rounds of Easy mode with all the cards unlocked before embarking on the campaign (i.e. story game). To start, choose a character and then use travel cards represent-

ing places, unknown encounters, and enemy mobs to traverse through three zones (Suburbs, Wilds, and Borderland), fighting a powerful Elder God at the end of each. Battles are also fought with cards, which include a variety of attacks and blocks as well as others that apply statuses (cold, wet, on fire) and blessings/curses. Additionally, there's equipment, relics, and consumables to collect, which make things easier for our hero during his/her travels, as does upgrading the Museum base, allowing for better perks at the start of each run.

Death comes often – typically a result of running out of health, sanity or fuel – but it also progresses the narrative cut scenes, concerning the shady organization the player is part of and whether its members are here to stop the apocalypse or – *gasp!* – help usher it in. The monsters and creepy townsfolk are inspired by Lovecraft's fiction and are both beautifully illustrated and devastatingly weird with their gaping toothy maws and otherworldly features and ap-



pendages. In fact, the art is just as top-notch as the gameplay – a remarkable achievement for Ukrainian indie developer Artem Bazdyrev of Flatcoons.

Recommended for fans of Lovecraft and roguelike deckbuilders alike, just be sure to take a break if you notice tentacles sprouting from any places they shouldn't.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



HEADSHOTS: FANTASTIC ART AND GAMEPLAY, SOLID CARD AND CHARACTER UPGRADE SYSTEMS
MISFIRES: VOICE ACTING IS A BIT UNEVEN AT TIMES



AMANDA THE ADVENTURER 2

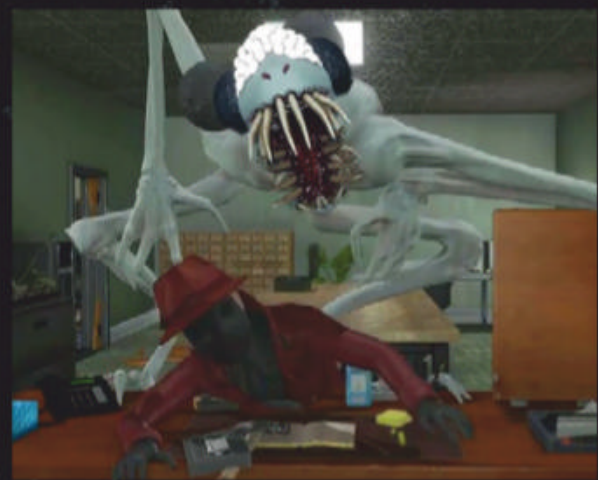
DreadXP
PC

Amanda is back for a second adventure (or third, if you count the 2022 game jam demo *Pilot Episode*) and this time, she suffers no fools – by that I mean *Amanda the Adventurer 2* will test players' wits to the very edge of reason, possibly driving them as deranged as the titular cartoon kids' show host.

For the uninitiated, the original *Amanda the Adventurer* game cast players as Riley, who inherits a house from her Aunt Kate and discovers a VHS tape of the eponymous children's TV show. The episode on that tape dropped clues to environmental puzzles and further tapes, connecting the mysteries of the show's strange origin,

a string of missing children, and Riley's missing aunt. In this sequel, picking up right where the first game left off, Riley is partnered with an anonymous masked "friend" of Kate's and dropped into the public library on a rainy night. As before, mystery VHS tapes of *Amanda the Adventurer* contain episodes where an increasingly unhinged Amanda and her trusty (if trepidatious) sidekick Woolly tackle seemingly simple household activities like cooking breakfast, building a birdhouse, and planning a trip around the world. But also, as before, there's a streak of menace in these kid-friendly episodes, and failing a tricky puzzle carries ruthless consequences.

Any more detail is bound to be spoilery but, be warned, some of these puzzles are finicky and annoying – most notably the very first one, which is obtuse enough to make players think twice about proceeding. Further, the timing tricks and attention to detail required while watching the



VHS tapes mean you'll go through them many, many times over (there is a fast-forward button but it can't be trusted not to skip through something important). Bottom line: *Amanda the Adventurer 2* presents a fresh challenge for fans of the first game, but the real horror here is the toll it'll take on your patience.

ANDREA SUBISSATI



HEADSHOTS: A+ EERIE ATMOSPHERE, SLOW-BURN STORY, SOLID VOICE ACTING
MISFIRES: PUZZLES ARE TEDIOUS AND REQUIRE MANY VIEWINGS OF REPETITIVE AMANDA EPISODES

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THE CENOBITES, CANDYMAN, THE NIGHTBREED... CLIVE BARKER HAS GIVEN US SOME OF THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE MONSTERS IN THE GENRE'S HISTORY. BUT WHICH IS THE MOST MEMORABLE? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO BATTLE IT OUT!

WHO IS CLIVE BARKER'S MOST INDELIBLE CHARACTER?

CANDYMAN FROM CANDYMAN (1992)

MEGAN POCZOS

"Candyman demonstrates how fear impacts entire generations."

LOOK IN THE MIRROR. SAY HIS NAME. THAT'S ALL YOU HAVE TO DO. IT'S HARD TO IDENTIFY A CHARACTER MORE INDELIBLE THAN THE ONE AN entire urban legend is based upon: one that has lingered on the lips of kids at sleepovers for generations. But Clive Barker's titular tragic villain from *Candyman* leaves much deeper marks than scared children.

Adapted from Barker's short story "The Forbidden" (1985), the plot centres on grad student Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen) who is working on a thesis regarding urban legends in marginalized communities, which leads her to the story of mid-19th-century Black painter Daniel Robitaille. The victim of a hideous hate crime that saw him tortured, lynched, and dismembered by an angry mob, Robitaille retains our sympathy even as he takes more victims and appears to set up Lyle for the murders. His story is revealed through glimpses, akin to how legends are born in the real world: a hook for a hand and associations with fire and bees come into full relief as the details that began his reign of terror are revealed.

But beyond his tragic backstory and the unforgettable series of murders he lets loose, Candyman remains a prescient parable of the changing face of racism, where mobs with pitchforks are replaced with the twin terrors of segregation and gentrification – a lesson Helen learns by paying the ultimate price.

Whether as a story, a movie, or a single character in the pantheon of horror villains, Candyman demonstrates how fear impacts entire generations of a community and morphs the tragedy of a real person into a horrifying spectre that can physically manifest himself in another time and space. And all you have to do is say his name...



DR. DECKER FROM NIGHTBREED (1990)

DR. BENNY GRAVES

"The 'Breed may pejoratively call all others meat, but Decker believes it in his bones."

BARKER'S BEST CHARACTER? WHAT A CHALLENGE! THE MOST OBVIOUS CHOICE WOULD BE THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE ORDER OF THE GASH, BUT THERE'S another figure from Clive Barker's works that has remained fixed and vivid in my mind like a jewelled pin driven into my skull. Dr. Philip K. Decker, the antagonist of Barker's 1988 novella *Cabal* and its cinematic counterpart *Nightbreed*, is, well, a breed apart.

A prestigious psychiatrist, Decker initially appears to be treating protagonist Aaron Boone's crumbling psyche. Boone believes he is finding some degree of salvation in unburdening himself of the turmoil in his mind and the nightmares of a mysterious place called Midian. However, there's far from any balm in Decker's psych sessions as we discover that he intends to frame Boone for his own crimes. These include a series of murders committed with a vicious ferocity that speaks to a disturbing degree of inhumanity.

In *Cabal*, Decker attributes his violence to Ol' Button Face, a mask that drives his murderous urges. Constrained in a zipper-mouthed burlap sack, Decker is without preference when it comes to choice of victims; his only motivating factor is a need for a constant supply of bodies that he can mutilate beyond recognition.

In the cinematic realm, Decker is brought to life with aplomb by none other than body horror maestro David Cronenberg. Cutting

an imposing figure with a face that promises benign neutrality, it's difficult to imagine anyone else wearing the now-iconic mask. Cronenberg is just as skilled with his face covered, with his dialogue and sheer physicality delivering the dead-eyed reality of Decker's violence. The 'Breed may pejoratively call all others meat, but Decker believes it in his bones. Many infernal thanks to Clive Barker for ensuring he lives rent free in my head!

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A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 4: THE DREAM MASTER

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 3 IS THE BEST SEQUEL!



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